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—By AUSTIN CORCORAN AND M. J. COREY

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RANCH ROMANCES

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FANNY ELLSWORTH, Editor

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IT WAS midnight when Jim Mallory stepped from the Western States Limited at Blanchard. With no taxi at the station and burdened with his heavy bag, he welcomed the agent's suggestion of a short cut to the hotel. And it was fine going until the moon ducked behind a cloud bank. With the world plunged into darkness, bends of the path tricked him into harsh contact with the brush on either side. After some floundering about he was sure he had strayed into a cross trail, and it was a relief to spy a light at no great distance on his left.

A break in the brush decided him to make for this. Apparently the light came from a partly opened door into a large building, the bulk of which he sensed rather than saw. As he advanced he could see around the edge of the door into a garage. Two men stood before a cupboard at the far end, one of them exceedingly tall. On the instant that Mallory's eye caught that impression, something struck him heavily on the head and he went into a blackout more complete than the moon had given to the night. For a long time he felt nothing and he heard nothing.

"Please wake up! Oh, please!" the words came to Jim's ears from seemingly a great distance.

"Wake up! You *must!*" The voice seemed a trifle louder now, but the plea made no impression beyond that of registering on his hearing.

Hands moved his head, then caught hold of his arms. These efforts had no more effect than the imploring voice accompanying them. There were other broken exclamations, panting breath, a strong tugging at his shoulders. He was being moved, his legs dragging. A bit at a time, he was hauled over some bumps. But it didn't seem to concern him particularly. There was little sensation in his body and his mind was barren of thought.

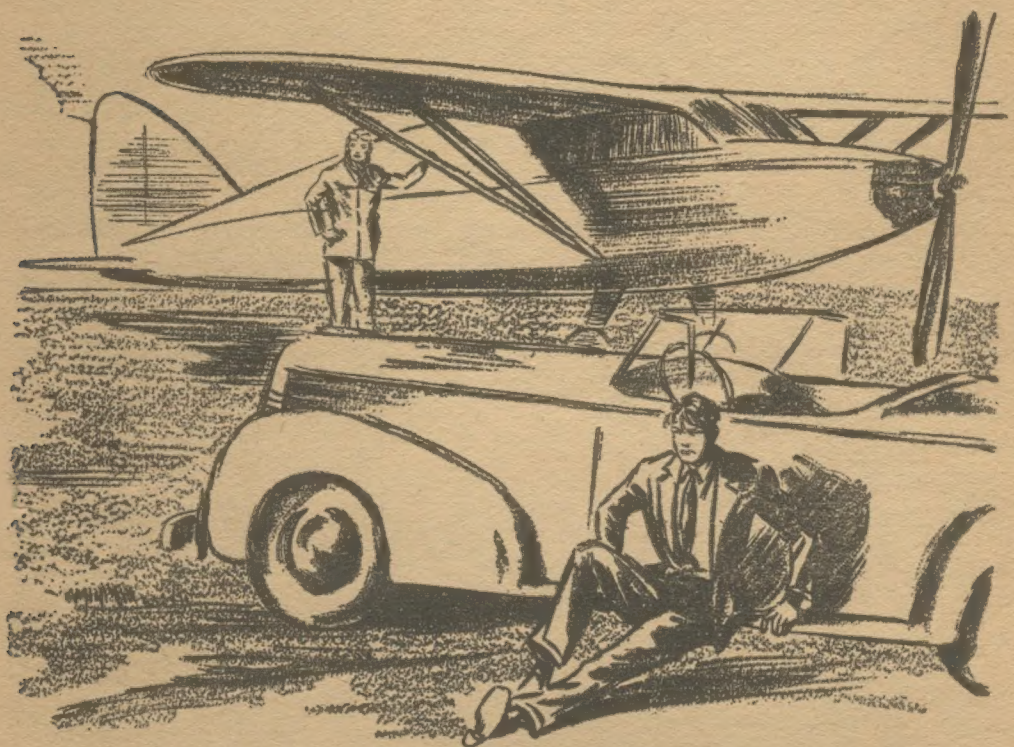
This went on for a while, then the hands released him.

"Lie still, don't move!" the voice commanded. "Please, please understand me. You must lie perfectly still while I am gone. *Don't move!*"

Jim had no wish to move, no wish for anything. When he no longer heard the voice, oblivion returned. This was unbroken until a long whistle, then a roaring and a shaking of the ground aroused his senses in the same vague manner. The whistle came again and

YESTERDAY COMES BACK

BY AUSTIN CORCORAN & MYRTLE JULIETTE COREY



WHEN yesterday comes back it's no good unless it has a bit of tomorrow's romance thrown in with it, to make today exciting.

the roaring receded. Then he heard a different voice:

"Dag nab it, feller, you had a close call!"

Impressions were quickening and Mallory felt the slash of pain through his head.

"Still out," the voice went on. "Good thing I called Doc. Here he comes. Hi, Purdy, this way!"

As his lashes parted a beam of light caught Mallory in the eyes.

"He's damn lucky you came along and yanked him off the track," a heavier voice said. "That freight would've pulverized him."

"He—didn't," Mallory murmured.

"Didn't what, soldier?" the second voice asked.

"Yank me. It was—the girl," Jim mumbled thickly.

"Dag nab it, he's flighty in the head!"

"Like enough, Bogy, with that bump. Give me a hand and we'll pack him over to my car. I'll fix him up in the office."

The pain slashed Jim vigorously while the two men were carrying him and he went groggy again when he was settled in the automobile. When he returned to full consciousness he was lying on a couch in a lighted room.

A short, oldish man stood at his side looking at Mallory intently from round, faded blue eyes. Grey hair formed a fuzzy brush about the bald spot atop his round head.

"The patient's recoverin', Doc," he announced.

"Sure he is," the doctor agreed, bending for a close look at Jim. He too, was past middle age with lines of strain etched into his features. "Feel like telling us anything about yourself?" he asked.

"Sure," Mallory assented. "I was taking the short cut the agent told me about, over to the hotel. Got off the path and something hit me on the head, I guess."

"I'll say you got off the path," the doctor declared, "onto the railway track way below the station. Fell and hit your head on a rail, probably. Bogy Kemp, this sharp-eyed old cowpuncher here, found you lying there, your bag beside you."

"Nope," Jim denied, "I tell you I was walking across some open lots when I was hit. And it was a girl found me."

"Girl, hoh!" Bogy snorted. "I guess you'd been having yourself a li'l' nip outa a bottle afore you got off that train. I been called a lotta names in my time, but dag nab it, that's the first time I was ever called a gal!"

"There *was* a girl!" Jim persisted despite the spinning of his head that compelled him to close his eyes.

"You can settle that point tomorrow," Dr. Purdy said, "after you have a long sleep. Drink this." He slid an arm around Jim's shoulders and held a glass to his lips. A blanket was drawn over him, then he heard their retreating footsteps.

He lay without moving. A fellow couldn't do anything with a head full of fireworks. But when they quit shooting off and he got on his legs again, he'd prove to that pair that he had got off the train cold sober and knew exactly what he was doing every step of the way until he passed out. In memory he retraced his progress from the railway station. He had not walked along the track at any time. He remembered exactly how the ground felt between his feet with occasional stretches of sand. Once he had stumbled slightly over a timber after he started towards the light, then he had kicked a tin can. Checking over these items, he gradually fell into sleep.

IT WAS mid-forenoon when Jim Mallory awakened. He decided he was in a room of the doctor's office. His uniform coat hung over a chairback, his bag and shoes stood on the floor near the couch.

Sitting up, he felt of his head gingerly. It wasn't bad, if he moved kind of easy. He could hear sounds in the other part of the house and when he began walking around, footsteps approached the door. This was opened after he assured a feminine voice that he was awake. A gaunt woman in stiffly starched gingham dress and white apron was revealed.

"Doc Purdy said I was to give you breakfast," she said, "and you're to wait here till he comes back from his mornin' calls."

While she waited on him at the table she explained that she kept house for the doctor and was accustomed to finding he had brought home some victim of a fight or an accident.

"You ain't a Blanchard boy," she said. "Was you planning to stay here?"

"No," he replied, "just stopping over. "Do you know a cowpuncher around here named Bogy Kemp?"

"Sure do," she replied. "Bogy's worked for Jeff Chandler ever since they was both young fellers."

"For Jeff Chandler!" Jim exclaimed with quickening interest. "Is his ranch near town?"

"Well, it ain't so far out," she said. "But the family's living in the town house; they ain't moved back to the ranch this summer. There's talk that mebbe they never will. Jeff ain't scarcely been able to keep it goin' these last two years, with the war taking all the men. He's got a chance now to sell it to a rich feller named— Oh, there comes Doc!" she broke off to exclaim. "I'll bring in the coffee pot. He'll wanta drink two or three cups."

Jim recounted his previous night's experience as the two men sat at the table. When he had finished, the doctor shook his head thoughtfully. "You seem very clear as to your facts," he said, "but you were certainly lying on the track when Bogy found you. Got any enemies around Blanchard?"

"Don't know of any," Jim said with a baffled grin. "Never was any place near here, till last night. I promised Billy Chandler I'd drop by and see his folks, if I ever came back to the United States on leave. Billy and I had

the same base in the Islands for a year. After I was discharged, I came this way."

"Glad you did," the doctor said heartily. "May do Jeff good. The old-timer's in a bad way, especially since Billy was reported missing, though Jeff won't admit the boy won't come back."

"I'll go and see him as soon's I clean up a bit," Jim said.

"Take things easy for a day or two," the doctor advised. "That was a considerable whack you got."

As they rose from the table, Jim caught a movement outside the window. It was the top of a stockman's hat whisking to one side. Jim sprang forward but was too late. The narrow strip of yard between house and street was empty of occupants and nobody was visible on the sidewalk.

"Somebody was parked under the window," he explained.

"Shading up, probably," the doctor said. "It's getting kind of hot in the sun these days."

MALLORY said nothing further but he was thinking that the movement of the figure beneath the hat had been both sick and furtive, using considerable care not to attract attention from inside the house. It seemed absurd to imagine there had been anything in his conversation with the doctor which would be of interest to an eavesdropper. Yet it was no more absurd than his having been knocked out the previous night. He had not been robbed, which removed the only reason he could imagine for the assault. There was a possibility he had been mistaken for somebody else. At any rate, he meant to say nothing further about it.

Nor was he saying any more about the girl. Yet he was positive there had been a girl, one with a lovely voice, contralto notes that vibrated in his memory. It was she who had dragged him from the track, no matter what the boastful Bogy Kemp maintained. And that was a mystery Jim was fully determined to solve. Finding this girl seemed the most worth while effort he had considered since his arrival back in the United States.

Dr. Purdy had gone ahead of him into the office and was thoughtfully examining Jim's cap, which he had taken from the table. "You may be right," he said. "This looks like something had been brought down on your head from the left. And the cap prevented a far more serious injury than you sustained." He regarded Jim through narrowed eyes. "If this is true, whoever struck you went to some pains to make it appear you'd been injured on the railroad track. I believe if I were you I'd let it ride that way for a bit, accept the supposition that you did wander back there and receive the injury by accident."

"Okay," Mallory agreed, "mouth shut and eyes open, from this on out."

He learned that an account of his accident had preceded him to the hotel. While he was registering the clerk said, "Doc Purdy gave the night man at the depot a real bawling out for sending you by the short cut. If you'd been killed, he said 'twould have been Blake's fault."

"I wouldn't say that," Jim temporized, changing the subject with a question. "Can you tell me where Jeff Chandler lives?"

"Straight along this street to the left, big house on the edge of town. Stands in a yard with a bunch of trees. Do you know Jeff?"

When Mallory explained his association with the younger Chandler, the clerk sighed. "Fine boy, Billy," he said. "Jeff's his grandfather and Billy's the core of the old boy's heart. The Chandlers came into this country on the heels of the Indians as they moved out, and Jeff can't forget that. He just wears himself down trying to fight everything and everybody that's new. His daughter, Rena, is the same way. Lives in the past. But the girl, Billy's sister, is right on her toes. They say she's engaged to Phil Judson. The Judsons ain't been here long. They're in the dough and strictly on the modern side—betcha old Jeff don't take to that idea."

"It's hard for old folks to take on new ways," Mallory broke into the torrent of words when the clerk paused for breath. "Going to clean up now," he added, taking the key from the desk. "Don't bother, I can find room twenty-one."

He preferred to size up the Chandlers for himself and guessed that any comment made to the garrulous clerk of the Blanchard House would be immediately set in circulation.

Shaving proved a tough job, the entire left side of his face being extremely sensitive to the slightest touch. Jim grinned at his mirrored reflection.

"You lop-sided sonuvagun!" he exclaimed. "One half of your head out-size, greenish cast to that cheek as if you've spoiled in spots, and a real hang-overish look altogether. Good

thing Billy's little sis is spoken for. Won't have to worry about *her* noticing my blemishes!"

The sprucing-up process set his head to spinning and Jim eyed the bed with favor. No use trying to talk with old Jeff until he got a grip on that whirly business.

THE AFTERNOON was half gone when Mallory turned from the Blanchard House to stroll along Main Street to the left. He sized the town up as being pleasantly alive without too much speed. Almost across from the hotel was a substantial two-story and basement building bearing the words *Blanchard Leader* in impressive letters across the front. Between stores on that same side of the street he glimpsed open spaces beyond which he heard the chuff-chuffing of a railroad engine. It would be some place over there that he had wandered in the previous night's darkness. Jim promised himself that he'd take a good look over that open ground very early the next morning, before there would be any risk of attracting much attention.

NORMA and JIM

Up a side street to his right he glimpsed a building he decided must be a broadcasting station. There was every evidence that despite its age, Blanchard was taking on modern color. At one point a shabby saddle shop or a little old house was strongly suggestive of pioneer days in the cow country, and a few steps farther would be a new concrete structure with wide plate glass windows. He had left the stores behind when he spied a square house set well back from the street. The yard was fenced but both gates stood hospitably open. There was a barn and a small corral at the back. In the latter he glimpsed a light sorrel horse.

"Bet that's the Blondy Billy was always talking about," he thought as he went on and turned into the narrow boardwalk leading to the front porch.

As he mounted the steps he heard the voices of two men from inside the house.

One said in a smooth, self-contained manner, "It's a good offer, Chandler. I'll hold it open for your further consideration."

"It's closed so far's I'm concerned," a deeper voice, vibrant with anger, replied. "I'm not selling to you, Judson. Come hell or high water, the old Star Ranch is going to be just as it is, when Billy comes home."

"And — if he doesn't come back?" the smooth tones suggested.

"He will." This was a firm statement. "That 'reported missing' don't prove a thing to me. What if his plane was down? He'll show up. I'd know if anything happened to Billy."

"Suppose he's crippled or doesn't want to run the ranch? You know these boys who have been overseas so long change their—"

"S'pose nothin'!" the deep voice growled. "Billy won't change. The very soil of the old ranch is in his blood, like it's in mine. Billy wasn't one to talk out his heart, but he said when he was leavin', 'Gran'dad, if anything was to happen to me, I'd come back and ride Blondy over the ranch on moonlight nights. That's my idea of Paradise and there isn't anything could hold me back!' Har-r-rumph!" An angry clearing of his throat halted his speech, then the old man exclaimed, "What the hell am I spillin' my insides to you for? Get on your way, Judson. I ain't sellin' to you, nor to anybody else to make a dude outfit out of the finest cow ranch in all of God's outdoors. Get on, I say, and don't come around no more with your 'good offers'!"

The door was flung open with vigor and a stockily built, expensively dressed man emerged with more rapidity than dignity. Hot red spots centered his closely shaven cheeks and even shaded glasses failed to mask entirely the glint in his eyes. His mouth twisted with fury.

Mallory was startled, the man's emotion seemed so out of proportion to the situation. He strode past without appearing to notice Jim, who had drawn to one side. Nor did the old man beyond the threshold spy him. Chandler's gaze followed his departing visitor, wrath flaming from the eyes between sun-wrinkled lids.

"The gall of that damned money-hawg!" he was spluttering.

"Sh, sh, Father! There's somebody on the porch," a thin, feminine voice cautioned from beyond the old man.

"What? Somebody here? Oh, excuse me, didn't see you, young feller."

Stepping forward, Mallory introduced himself.

Jeff Chandler's strongly marked, weather-beaten features relaxed their rigidity of anger. Jim's hand was caught in a hearty grip.

"Hear that, Rena?" the old man asked excitedly. "He's Billy's friend, the one he wrote us about. Come in, come in, boy. Meet my daughter Rena."

"Hell's fire!" the old man exploded. "I *don't*. How many times must I tell you I'm hanging on till Billy comes back? Wouldn't sell to Judson anyhow."

"Just because he's rich and—"

"No!" Chandler broke in. "Because I can't stand the fellow's nose!"

"That's plenty of a reason," Jim remarked with an infectious grin, hoping to relieve the tension.

The old man relaxed. "Got a nose too much like a rat I ran out of here one time."

"You mean Ez Boynton!" Rena gasped. "But he's dead and buried."

"I haven't forgotten him," Chandler declared, turning at a slight sound from an inner doorway. "Oh, there you are, Norma! Come in and meet Billy's friend, Jim Mallory."

When Jim glimpsed the girl framed in the doorway his knowledge that she was "spoken for" failed to relieve self-consciousness at his own battered appearance. She was slender and fairly tall, and no harsh lines spoiled her figure. She had fascinating curves in exactly the right places. Her eyes were a dark hazel below slender, wing-tipped brows. Her hair was a warm, mahogany brown. Coming forward, she extended a hand, smiling her welcome since her grandfather was still talking.

RENA *PHIL* *JEFF* *JUDSON*

HOLDING fast to his hand, Chandler drew Mallory into a living room that filled half the lower floor of the house. "Sorry you caught me shooting off my mouth like a fool," he said. "That Judson makes me made as hell!"

"You shouldn't lose your temper that way, Father," Rena Chandler chided in a thin soprano. She had a fluttery manner. "Mr. Judson meant all right. He only wanted to be sure, if you did want to sell—"

"I missed our game of checkers last night, Normie," he was concluding his speech. "You didn't come right home after that broadcast. I tell you, I don't favor that radio business!"

"Ellie wanted me to stop for a soda," Norma said.

Mallory was startled. The voice. He had heard it before. It wasn't possible there were two in Blanchard with those same contralto modulations.

"There was no harm in that," Rena declared with fluttery haste. "I looked at my clock when I heard her come in."

"And what time was that?" Chandler persisted.

"It was—after ten, some," Rena replied.

"Suppose we talk of something of interest to Jim Mallory," Norma suggested, a sparkling in her eyes indicating that she had spirit.

Her glance flicked over Jim with casual interest and she did not appear to notice his intent gaze. He was sure she was the girl who had rescued him the previous night. Her aunt was covering for her and it appeared that there might be the dickens to pay if the old rancher discovered how late his granddaughter had been out. Mallory thought he had the play figured now. Norma had discovered him lying on the track. After hauling him to a position of comparative safety, at one side, she had run home for Bogy, whom she could trust to keep quiet about her connection with the affair. What had she been up to, Jim wondered? That seemed a funny spot for her to be at so late an hour, and alone.

"There's some reasonable explanation," he decided. "That girl may be impulsive, but she's got a real head on her shoulders."

Jeff Chandler insisted that Jim stay for supper. When Bogy Kemp came in, he suppressed an astonished exclamation and shot a glance at Norma. She seemed not to notice this and her manner expressed only impersonal interest when Mallory gave a sketchy account of his previous meeting with the old cowpuncher.

"So that's how you got your head hurt!" Chandler exclaimed. "Bogy, you old scoundrel, I had an idea you slept at night. Now I find you go hurrahin' around town. But it's lucky for Jim that you do get about."

WHEN they rose from the table the old man turned to Mallory. "If you can spare the time, I'd like a few words with you, while the women folks do the dishes." Leading the way into the living room, he came directly to the point as soon as they were seated. "Have you got a job, or any definite plans?" he asked.

"Haven't anything lined up yet," Jim replied. "I worked for the XL outfit in Arizona, before I enlisted. That changed hands since, but I figured on hitting for that country where I'm known."

"Would you consider going on the Star C payroll?" Chandler asked. "I need a man who knows cow work and can step into the saddle and take over. My riding days are done. Mostly I have to set back and just look on. I've only got a couple of young kids at the ranch and they ain't much better than nothing, without somebody to boss 'em. I had to sell a lot of stuff I hated to, for lack of help. I want to get goin' again, and I'll give you a free hand if you'll stay."

"It's a deal," Mallory said emphatically. "Can't think of anything I'd rather do."

"Fine!" Chandler exclaimed, beaming with satisfaction. "We'll go out to the ranch tomorrow, the middle of the forenoon. I wanta wait till the mail's put up. Might get something from Billy." A sudden gruffness of tone betrayed the depth of the old man's feeling for his grandson.

Jim lingered for a while, hoping Norma would show up in the living room. He felt slightly injured that she displayed no more interest in him. Mallory was without personal conceit but he knew that girls in general liked to have him around and gave him considerably more than passing attention. Norma Chandler might be promised to that gink whose name Jim had forgotten, but heck, a girl who looked as alive as Norma should be more sociable.

"Maybe it's that business last night that's holding her off," he finally thought, feeling better after this reflection.

When the telephone rang shrilly, he heard her voice in the dining room. She talked quite a little, laughing in a manner he found very tantalizing.

"That phone's a damn nuisance," Chandler growled. "Bet they want Normie at the broadcasting station again. Ellie and Dave Vance are nice folks, but I'd like 'em better if they hadn't started up that radio dingus here. If anybody wants canned shows and havin' their news hollered at 'em, 'stead of reading it with a chance to ponder the meanin', they can get all they need from the cities. This station just give a chance for a bunch around here to show off. Normie's got a knack of accompanyin' 'em on the piano or guitar and they're always after her. When I think what it's led to, I wisht I had never let Rena have her take lessons!"

Refraining from comment, Jim rose to take his departure. He had figured right. When he neared the outside doorway, Norma was hanging up the receiver on the instrument just inside the dining room door.

Jeff Chandler had followed Jim. "I s'pose Phil Judson wants you to play for him again," he said to Norma.

"Not tonight," she told him, the angry sparks Mallory had noted before again lighting her eyes.

Grumbling something under his breath, the old man went on to the kitchen.

"Gran'dad is so prejudiced," Norma exclaimed. "He expects everybody to act as they did fifty years ago. Just because the Judsons have a fair amount of money and are comparative newcomers in this country, he's terribly bitter against them. More so because Phil's father wants to buy the ranch."

"Your grandfather doesn't want to sell it," Jim said.

"That's foolish," she declared.

"You think he should sell the Star C?" Jim asked, surprised.

"I CERTAINLY do," Norma retorted with vigor, but careful to use a low tone. "He's had nothing but grief with it the last few years. We've all suffered. The ranch can never be what it was in its days of glory, that are all Gran'dad thinks about. For one thing there isn't the same winter range available. He couldn't possibly run the cows he did when he was younger. It's nearly impossible to get cowboys. Oh, it's a mess, that's what it is. A headache for everybody concerned."

"A lot of service men are being discharged," Mallory remarked. "The cowboy problem will soon be solved. And what about Billy?"

"Oh," Norma's face shadowed. "We can only hope about that, you know. And he wouldn't want anybody to make such a sacrifice on his account." They had moved on to the porch now but the light from the doorway revealed her changing expressions.

"You grew up on the ranch, didn't you?"

"Yes," she replied. "When Daddy and my mother were killed, Aunt Rena and Gran'dad brought us up. Of course I have an affection for the place, but it's foolish to try to turn back the calendar and kid yourself into thinking you can do something that's impossible."

"It seems like the old boy rates another whirl at it," Jim said thoughtfully. "I'll help all I can, and maybe it won't be such a headache this year."

"You mean you're going to stay here? Work for Gran'dad?"

Mallory couldn't tell whether or not the idea pleased her.

"Just promised I would," he said. "We're going out tomorrow to look over the setup. And please don't size me wrong. I favor modern gadgets and ways of doing things, but that doesn't mean we must pitch away everything that isn't dated today. Lots of the old things bear making over. If anything was good once, the elements are still there. It's only a case of twisting them around a bit. Some tough going during these war years doesn't mean Chandler should give up cattle ranching."

"Thanks for the lecture," she said, her lips twitching with a smile that told him she was not angry. "I still think it would be better to sell the Star C, when Gran'dad has such a good offer. But I'll keep quiet and watch you demonstrate your theories. It's up to you if a headache is your sole reward."

"You don't think I'll get anywhere," Jim said hastily, aware that footsteps were approaching on the walk behind him. Norma's glance had already gone over his shoulder.

"I don't think about it at all; that's your job," she retorted lightly. "The footsteps had come close and halted. "Hello, Phil," she said. "Glad you came right along, so our practicing won't keep Gran'dad from going to sleep early."

She introduced the newcomer to Mallory. Neither displayed warmth in greeting the other.

"This is the gink she's tied up with, the son of that feller who was here," Jim thought, deciding at once that Phil Judson would present only a negligible appearance without his striking sports outfit. Certainly wouldn't be noticed in a crowd. He was neither good nor bad looking. His features were average, eyes between blue and grey, hair dark.

As Jim went towards the street he admitted to himself that the younger Judson had a way with women. Mallory didn't enjoy picturing him with Norma. Of course it meant nothing to him personally beyond the fact that any decent fellow hated to see a swell girl take up with anybody but the best. The more he recalled Phil Judson's face, the more evident its imperfections appeared. The

eyes were too shallow. There was something wrong about the nose, too. Could be called a shade foxy. No, it sure wouldn't be a shock to discover that this Judson bird wasn't a square-shooter.

WHEN Mallory turned from the yard into the street he heard the quick tap-tap of feet on the sidewalk ahead of him and saw the figure of a man hurrying towards the main part of town. He had a passing thought that it was odd where the fellow had come from; Jim had noticed nobody passing the house. The man seemed to have just sprung from the ground and started running. But he was forgotten almost before he receded from view.

It was quiet on that side of Blanchard, the houses far apart. He went slowly, enjoying the light breeze which brought a refreshing scent from the open country roundabout. You could imagine young grass, sage here and there, cedars on the higher levels. Picturing the range he would see on the following day, Mallory came to the outer fringe of business buildings. These were closed for the day and there was no stirring of life in them nor on the street. Groans and a weak cry for help at once attracted his attention.

Jim halted. He was at the entrance of an alley between the shell of an abandoned house and an old feed warehouse he remembered idly noticing that afternoon.

"O-o-oh! Oh! Help! O-o-oh!"

The moaning tones came from the gloom of the alley.

"Hello!" Jim called. "Where are you?"

"Here, on the platform," the voice replied. "A lot of grainsacks fell inside, caught me. O-oh, ugh! Managed to crawl this far, then I couldn't make anybody hear me call for help."

Jim had turned into the alley and was advancing toward the platform. "I'll get somebody to help move you," he said.

"Shift me a bit first," the voice said. "Steps in front of you."

They were dimly visible now, and he mounted, the old treads creaking under his weight. His right foot was on the platform. As the left swung forward, the toe of his shoe caught under a loose board. Jim stumbled sideways and a bullet nipped through the air where his chest had been a second before. Instantly a second bullet followed, aimed lower. He felt the bite of it on his belt as he lurched to the right and plunged from the platform, striking the ground on his shoulder.

Before he could scramble up he heard the thump of feet on wooden flooring. Jim rolled under the shelter of the thick planks and, getting his feet under him, went at a crouching run towards the rear of the building. His assailant would expect him to head for the street, but it would be lighter there and Mallory's fleeing form would be a fair target. No use pushing his luck too far. He couldn't hope to dodge the next bullet.

The fellow was still on the platform. His eyes were used to the darkness and would spot any movement in the alleyway. But for Jim to remain where he was would probably mean being caught like a rat in a trap. The gunman would soon think of that hiding place and commence slinging lead under there.

Cautiously Mallory eased into the open. There were no rear steps and he hugged the wall of the building. Waiting a few seconds, he began inching towards the back of the warehouse. Extended hands explored the ground ahead for anything that would make a sound under his feet. Carefully shifting bits of stick and stone, he had nearly reached the corner when he struck against a loose piece of board that lay against the side of the foundation. This slid down with a sharp rattling noise. Mallory sprang ahead and around the corner. Still crouching, he ran along back of the building but keeping farther from its wall. He could hear pursuing feet and knew the gunman would fire at the least glimpse of his moving figure.

The lot was filled with treacherous traps and pitfalls. His feet tangled with a piece of wire. Then he struck an old bucket and set it rolling. He slid into a hole where some bits of broken crockery crunched noisily beneath his feet. No use mimizing the danger. That fellow was out to get him. There seemed to be nobody around that block of buildings at night. If anybody noticed the gunshots he probably would raise no alarm. His assailant risked little and, so long as he could hear Mallory, would probably stick to the pursuit.

With this in mind, Jim paused under one of the scrubby trees that were scattered over the

She smiled at him with tremulous red lips, and what could an impulsive young fellow like Jim do but kiss them?

lots at the rear of the store buildings. Standing erect close to the trunk, he reached up and tested the lower branches. Catching hold of one he drew himself cautiously up. Feet resting on that, he sat on a higher bough and leaned against the tree trunk. He could hear the other man, but the fellow was keeping so close to the building that he was invisible. The moon would soon be up. Would he clear out, for fear of being seen and later identified, or would he count on the moon's aid to spot his quarry?

While Mallory was pondering this, he heard advancing movements. The fellow was impatient, anxious to force something. Apparently he took a step, then stopped to stare about him and listen. Finally Jim could discern the shadowy outlines of his form. There was nothing distinctive. He seemed not very tall, nor heavy.

JIM BREATHED soundlessly as the figure came closer. Jim might have been part of the tree, so motionless he was, close against the dark column of the trunk. The gunman was working into the slight hollow, a vantage point from which to more readily note any movement on the higher ground of the lots. Nearer he came. Mallory could sense the turning of his head as he peered through the gloom and listened. For an instant, when the man moved beneath the branches, Jim thought he was discovered. He tautened, every nerve and muscle sensitized. He could hear cautious breathing almost beneath his feet.

Jim's weight shifted to the balls of his feet. Slowly he leaned forward, then he plunged. He struck the gunman on the shoulders, bearing him to the ground. The gunman went flat on his face, the gun exploding as he struck. Mallory grabbed his right arm and gave it a backward twist. Then he had the gun in his own hand and was punching the muzzle against the killer's back.

"Get up!" he ordered.

As the fellow lurched to his feet, Mallory said sharply, "Move! Around to the alley and out to the street. If you try to run, I'll make a sieve out of you. Get going!"

Without making a sound, his captive obeyed. It seemed too easy. Yet what could the fellow do? Jim had his gun. And he held the weapon close enough to give the fellow a frequent jab

. They made the alley. From there on it would be easy going and Jim stepped up the pace. They had gone almost the length of the platform when the fellow stumbled.

"Keep going!" Jim snapped. "Ugh!"

A backward kicked heel caught him on the kneecap. As he staggered a second kick slammed his stomach and he doubled like a jack-knife.

He fired, the bullet cutting a groove through the dust of the alley while Jim's captive bolted around the corner into the street. Jim heard the thudding feet as he untangled himself and lunged after him. When he shot around the corner, the sidewalk stretched ahead a full block, empty.

"Got clean away!" Jim exploded furiously.

He knew the gunman hadn't run the full block. He had holed up somewhere along the way. But search would be futile and might lead to an ambush. He cursed himself for not having struck a match and taken a look at the fellow's face. Now he had no means of identifying him, unless the gun proved a clue.

Jim went on slowly, scrutinizing the shadow fronts of the store buildings. All were closed, but he saw that there were open spaces between several, any of which would have afforded escape for the fugitive.

APPROACHING the busier blocks, Mallory thrust the gun into a pocket. It was still early enough for soda fountains to be doing big business and there were plenty of pedestrians on the sidewalks. He gave them only indifferent attention. His head ached and felt as hot as fire. And now that the excitement was over he became aware of a wetness inside his left sleeve. One of the shots had nicked him.

Jim strode quickly across the hotel porch and was making for the stairs, when the clerk hailed him. "Feller telephoned you, seemed awful anxious to get in touch with you."

Jim paused: "Did he give his name?"

"No. Said he just had to locate you, so I told him he'd likely find you at Chandler's," the clerk replied. "Y'know you was askin' about their place, and you bein' a friend of Billy's, I figgered you'd be invited to stay for supper."

"When was this phone call?" Mallory asked.

"Sometime 'fore dark. Say, what's happened to you now? You look as if you've

been rolled in a dust heap. And what's that, dripped on your pants? Looks like blood."

Jim shrugged. "I was just taking in a little of Blanchard's night life," he said as he headed for the staircase.

When he had snapped on the light in his room, he glanced about with a wry grin. "Almost expected to find somebody lying in wait here," he muttered. "But it's the second story and the window opens on Main Street, making it difficult to sneak in. Should be safe to go to sleep!"

He continued to joke ironically with himself while he cleaned up. But Mallory knew the attacks on him had not been made in jest. Somebody had tried to kill him almost as soon as he had arrived in town. Tonight had brought the second attempt. Two bullets had left their marks. A raw track across his left arm just above the elbow testified to the trail of one and a reddish spot beneath his belt, which had been gouged nearly through the leather, was the signature of the other.

"And God knows," he thought, "I haven't the remotest idea who's out to get me, nor why."

The dawn light had barely made objects clear when Mallory left his room the following morning. Descending the stairs as noiselessly as possible, he was relieved to discover that the garrulous clerk was absent from his post. A printed card advised that attention could be secured by ringing the bell.

"And that bird's attention is just what I *don't* want," Jim thought as he stole past the desk to the entrance.

The street was deserted. Not even a stray dog could be seen. And only a few indistinct sounds indicated that Blanchard was slowly coming to wakefulness. Jim strode quickly to the spot where the path from the railroad connected with the Main Street. He maintained this pace until he neared the brushy growth that fringed the farther stretch of the foot trail. Slowing, he carefully scrutinized the ground on the side where he had turned off. The hard-packed soil yielded no clue. He halted and turned to gaze off across the lots in an attempt to locate the buildings where he had seen the lighted doorway.

Far over in the lot were two small houses, each with what might be a garage in the rear. And the rear of almost every building along Main Street had doors opening into a basement or first story. Jim knew that he had spied the doorway before he turned from the path. But the path had so many turns it was difficult to decide from what angle he had been looking. Closing his eyes, he visualized the scene, concluding that the light had come from the opened doors into one of the business buildings. Angling in that general direction, he figured how far he had gone the night of his arrival. In a comparatively short time he spied a length of splintered timber. That must be the board he had stubbed his toe against.

PRESENTLY a soft spot of ground presented tracks he accepted as his own. A moment later he sprang forward with eagerness. A bunch of weeds had recently been flattened by some heavy object. Other growths had been trampled and there were a number of heel prints. Not only that, but a car had been driven close to the spot and halted there. A flat-leaved plant and the dirt around it were marked with oil drippings. Tire marks revealed that the car had been turned and driven straight towards the side street Mallory could see beyond the two small house. It had come in from an angle nearer Main Street.

He was stopping to examine every foot of the ground with care, when a familiar voice hailed him. Jim glanced over his shoulder.

"'Lo, Doc," he said. "You're out early."

"How about yourself?" the doctor retorted. "Um-m-m!" he murmured, nodding his head as he came closer. "Sleuthing, I see."

Mallory grinned. "And just look at what I've found!" he exclaimed. "That knocks cock-eyed any yarn about me falling on the railroad track."

Setting down his medicine case, Purdy examined Jim's findings. "Looks like you're right," he assented.

The seriousness of his expression deepened while Jim related the events of the previous night.

"Whoever telephoned me at the hotel was watching Chandler's house for me to come out. When I did, he scooted ahead to trap me at the alley," Mallory concluded.

Dr. Purdy nodded. "Looks sensible. What are you going to do?"

"Go on keeping my mouth shut and my eyes open, I guess," Jim said.

"Be a good idea to open your eyes a little wider, or they'll get you next time," Purdy advised.

Jim grinned but his eyes were grim. "I

won't advance a foot without a scouting expedition," he said. "But waiting for the next attack's no good. Got to find out who's doing this. Got any local badmen who might mistakenly think I'd be a menace to their game?"

"Every town's got a bad bunch," the doctor replied, frowning. "But I still think you were mistaken for somebody else. Now they want to clean up on you for fear you'll get onto them. You'd only been in Blanchard a matter of minutes, hadn't seen a soul but the station agent, had you?"

"Only those two birds in the garage," Mallory said, narrowing his eyes thoughtfully. "Say, suppose they were up to something. Maybe they'd set a guard. And he jumped me when I came blundering across lots."

"Um-m-m! Sounds far-fetched," Purdy objected.

"Some far-fetched ideas work out," Mallory contended. "What's in those buildings along there?"

"The farthest is the Blanchard *Leader*, with two garages at the rear of the basement. Next comes Penny's store with the same setup in back, and then two groceries and a dime store that have either stockrooms or garages. But I don't see how that helps any."

"Don't seem so, Doc," Jim conceded. "But nothing about this business makes sense."

Returning to the path, they went on to Main Street together. When they were separating, Dr. Purdy said, "If I were you, I'd have Sheriff Owens check on that gun. He's a good sort and he'll do it on the Q. T. He's old but Owens is no dumbhead, as the bunch who are trying to oust him contend. He's too honest an officer to suit the gyp crowd, and the stream-lined, hurry-up-no-matter-who-you-run-over bunch say he's too slow."

"Sounds okay," Jim declared. "I'll have a few words with him."

MALLORY prolonged his breakfast in the Longhorn Café in the hope that a drygoods store would open early. He wanted some kind of an outfit he could wear to the ranch in place of his uniform. Also a pair of stock boots, until he could get some made to order or have stuff he had stored shipped from Arizona.

He glanced through the paper that had come in on the morning train, scowling at a column concerning activities of the Black Markets. Then he picked up a torn sheet of the previous day's Blanchard *Leader*. A picture near the top caught his eye. It displayed the stage of some public hall. Several figures with indefinite features were seated at the back. At the microphone stood an unusually tall man. He balanced so far back on his heels that the middle of his body bowed frontwards, the effect being extra noticeable because of the general thinness of his body. The caption had been on the torn-off portion of the page.

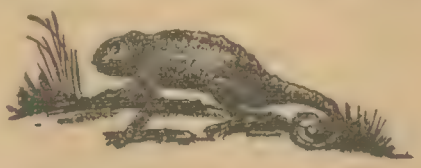
"Know who that is?" Mallory asked one of the two girls on duty.

"No," she said. "Both of us waitresses are new around here. I ain't never seen him. Looks like a bent stringbean, don't he?"

Jim agreed, paid his score and left the café. The doors of Penny's store were still closed. He went on to the *Leader* building. Since he was pursuing the far-fetched, why not check on this fellow who was the perfect double for the tall individual he had glimpsed in the lighted garage? Same posture and one that was distinctive.

A girl with a pretty but blank face was dusting off the information desk. Yes, she could supply a copy of the previous day's *Leader*. She did so and Mallory settled himself in one of the window seats to search for the picture. It was accompanied by no article and a line of description which stated, "Royal Whitman Stacy, Speaking in Mesa City at the Opening of the War Loan Drive."

Jim returned to the desk. "Who is this



man, what does he do?" he asked the platinum blonde.

"Oh, he's wonderful!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "He established that Round Lake Camp for Boys, where they train the wild kind to be good citizens. And he's interested people who have started a lot of others. Nobody can raise funds for good work like Royal Stacy can. He makes the most marvelous speeches for every War Loan. Everybody knows what a fine man he is, so good, you know."

"I suppose he comes to Blanchard often," Jim said.

"He's only been here once," she replied.

"And that was just recently?"

"No, it was more than a year ago," she said.

"I thought he was here the other day."

"No, indeed," the blonde declared firmly. "We'd have known it if he was. The *Leader* knows everything that happens in town."

"Is that so?" Jim remarked. "That really is news."

"It's the best paper in the Western states," she boasted. "That is, since Henry Judson bought it and made the plant all over and hired all new people. He was terribly particular who he picked out."

"Particular to get dumb ones," Mallory thought as he sized up a second girl and a colorless, lanky youth who had just entered.

He glanced around the really fine interior, equipped with the best and newest of fixtures. The building was impressive if the help wasn't.

On the way back to Penny's, he derided his hunch. The man he tried to hook up with something shady was a well know philanthropist, who couldn't have visited Blanchard without becoming a news item. Men of his ilk weren't overlooked.

"I wouldn't of thought there could be two of them bent stringbeans in the same part of the country," he reflected, "which goes to show that nothing is too queer to be true, and often is."

RETURNING to the hotel with his purchases, Mallory found the old clerk on duty, his sharp eyes constantly moving to cover any possible incident within his line of vision.

"So you're goin' to work for Chandler," he said. "I was just remarkin' that it's fine for the old man to get a friend of Billy's to help him out. He's so plumb set on not selling the ranch till he's sure Billy won't come back."

"You should be on the *Leader* staff," Mallory said, "star reporter."

"Ho, ho! I give 'em lots of news," the clerk boasted. "A wide-awake feller in my position has his finger right on the town pulse, you might say. And I'm awful good at figgerin' things out, when I get just the tail end of anything."

"So it seems," Jim commented, moving purposefully towards the stairs.

"For instance," the clerk ran on persistently, "I c'n see why Phil Judson had a sour look when he heard us commentin' on Jeff's luck. *He* naturally wouldn't be tickled to have a good-lookin' young feller who *might* be a rival, getting what you call a key position with his girl's family. Lord knows, Norma Chandler's pretty enough to be fought over."

"For God's sake!" Mallory muttered as he sprang up the stairs. "I feel exactly like a goldfish."

He dressed quickly, giving more thought than usual to his appearance which he decided was punk. But the ordinary cut and tailoring of the tan gabardine pants couldn't conceal the fine line of his hips and well muscled legs. Neither did the commonplace shirt disguise a flat, erect back and deep chest.

When he was packing, Jim paused suddenly to peer at a button of the coat he had been wearing the night of his arrival.

"A-a-ah!" he murmured with a pleased inflection.

Very carefully he detached two fine hairs. They were of rich shading and of the proper length to have come from a long bob. Smilingly he folded them into a bit of paper which he stowed in the pocket of his shirt and over which he buttoned the flap firmly.

"Probably she listened to see if my heart was beating," he thought, "and left what must be admitted is conclusive evidence."

The smile lingered around his lips while he answered the shrill call of the room phone.

"'Lo, Jim!" Jeff Chandler's voice came lustily over the wire. "C'm on out and you can take the car down to pick up your pack. I don't drive, neither does Bogy, or we'd pick you up."

"Be right out," Mallory replied, wondering how much the clerk could figure from the two speeches.

He was thinking that Norma must drive and wishing she had come for him. On the way out he was thinking up quite a case for himself. Without conceit he knew he was at least some better-looking than Phil Judson, and it was a safe bet that he was some years younger. On the face of it, all that Phil could claim and Jim couldn't was a lot of dough and the ability to sing over the radio. "I can get cash," Mallory thought with confidence, "and maybe I can sing if I try!" He chuckled. "Anyhow," his thoughts ran on, "I like myself better. I'll just give Norma a chance to discover if *she* does."

Jeff was sitting on the porch when Mallory arrived at the house and he led the way around to the barn, part of which had been adapted for a garage.

"Scarcely use it any more," Chandler said.

"Nights I have Blondy out in the box stall. I won't risk nothing happening to him while Billy's gone. There's a couple of other saddle horses back in the lot, so I can ride when I feel like it. Norma exercises Blondy, nobody else ever rides him."

When Mallory backed the car into the yard, Chandler climbed into the seat beside him. "We'll bring your stuff here and leave it," he said, "because I want you should come back with me tonight. We'll take a good looksee today, then we can make plans. Rena says she can't be hurried, that it'll take her at least a week to get ready to move out there. But I'm going to get the family bunched on the ranch this summer and live like a cowman had ought to."

JEFF CHANDLER proved to be good company, as men are who know their business and talk straight. It was plain that the Star C had been a fine outfit, probably the best in that part of the country. The ranch house looked snug and comfortable, though it it had something of the sadness of an unlived-in home. Outside were many evidences of neglect. But nowhere was there serious deterioration.

"Looks lonesome," Jeff said, "without the stir it always had. You can tell to look at it that there ain't enough cattle grazin' the range, that too few calves are bawlin' and there's nobody around that knows their business nor gives a hoot! That old house stands for something, Jim, and that something has just about faded away."

"Just temporary," Mallory declared cheerfully. "Of course you can't bring back candlelight days and all the handicaps the folks of old-times had to fight. We'd hate it like hell if we really turned back the calendar. But you can have fine cattle on the Star C and if the quantity is more limited, make up in quality."

"That sounds like sense, boy," the rancher returned. "We'll look the place over today. Then you go ahead, grab the reins and ride!"

"I will," Jim agreed, a note of huskiness in his voice.

He understood what it meant to Chandler, how it had hurt for the old hands to lose their grip, to watch everything slipping while the entire world appeared to be falling from its foundation. Privately Jim believed there was small chance that Billy ever would come home. But he could see no logical reason why Chandler should let go of the Star C. At the same time he comprehended the burden it might seem to Norma. Underneath the surface of her talk he sensed a loyalty to her grandfather. She probably feared the ranch would be lost in the end and it was better to make a good deal, relinquishing it while they could pull out with something substantial.

The two cowboys proved to be better types than Jim had feared. They were young, no more than seventeen, but both had honest eyes and seemed willing to work.

"You couldn't rely on what they'd do, because they lack experience," Jim told the rancher, "and they don't understand responsibility. But they'll fall in line okay. And probably we can pick up another man later on, if we need him."

They got horses and rode over part of the range. From one point Jim pointed to a distant house and group of outbuildings. "What's that place?" he asked.

"Used to belong to a fellow that came in here not long after the Chandlers," Jeff replied. "All the main branch of that family died and distant heirs sold the place over a year ago. Feller's made a kind of a dude ranch of it. Understood he had big plans for expansion, but the place was closed last fall and ain't had a soul around it this year. Windows are all boarded up. I had some idee the new owner, name of Grove, was in cahoots with Henry Judson. He was counting on gettin' my place so they'd make a regular dude colony over here."

They took a different road back to town and passed close to the other ranch. Jim glanced over the premises with idle curiosity. He could see that the house and yard had been fancied up. Appearances suggested an Easterner's idea of a ranch. The windows of the main house were boarded and weeds were growing rank in the yard. But automobile tracks were comparatively fresh in the road leading between big gates.

When Mallory indicated these, Jeff said, "Somebody been out to see how the place wintered, I guess. The boys told me today that nobody has showed up. There's never a light over here and they can see the place from the cabin where they're living."

Jim made no further comment but it looked to him as if a car had passed in and out several times. And the weeds were broken in front of the entrance to one of the smaller buildings. It occurred to him that it would

be a good place for somebody to camp and he was of the opinion that somebody was doing just that. Probably unknown to the owner. Well, that wasn't his affair.

DUSK was blending into darkness when Mallory drove the car into the yard in town. Rena had waited supper and hurried them to the table. They ate with hearty appetites, and few remarks were made aside from Jeff's comments on the day's experiences.

"It looks good out there, Rena," he said, "and this summer's going to be more like old times."

"I didn't think we'd ever go back," she replied.

"You always said you liked the Star C the best of any place. Ain't changed your mind, have you?" he asked.

"No, Father," she replied with a sigh, but—"

"But you're scairt," he broke in impatiently. "Scairt because everything ain't been on the up and up these last coupla years. Have you gone as daft as Normie, wantin' me to sell?" Chandler demanded.

"Of course not," Rena said tremulously. "I know how you feel, and—" She halted and gave the old man an entreating glance.

"You're going to stand by like you've always done," he told her. "And help get ready to give Billy a grand welcome when he comes back. If he doesn't get his discharge, he'll have a long leave."

Pushing back her chair, Norma rose hastily, face averted. "I'll have to be excused," she said. "The program goes on in twenty minutes."

"Hunnnh! So I s'pose I won't see you again tonight," her grandfather grumbled.

"We're only on a quarter of an hour," she replied.

"Well, I need a couple of pipes after that big feed," Chandler said. "I'll wait up."

"Can I walk over to the station with you?" Jim asked.

"If you like," she replied. Her voice held no warmth but he thought she did not look averse to his company.

"I want to talk with you," he said, as they went down the front walk. "There's something we must settle."

"Yes? You sound terribly serious. What is it?" she asked.

"We're going to settle right now that I know it was *you*, not Bogy, who found me the other night."

"Why do you say that?" she asked quickly, her tone sharp.

"Because it's true," he declared. "Wait!" He checked her protest, going on to repeat what she had said to him. "I can produce actual proof, too, a strand of your hair that caught in a button of my uniform. Norma, I hate deceit between friends, and that's what I want us to be. I must either go on pretending a lie, or bring this into the open with you. I shall, of course, mention it to nobody else. And I want to tell you I think it was wonderful the way you handled the situation."

"But you wonder what I was doing down there, at that hour," she burst out, "and why Aunt Rena deceived Gran'dad. She didn't know about you. I'd gone to rouse Bogy before I came into the house. But I told her where I'd been, and why I was delayed. She knew that Gran'dad would get dreadfully stirred up. He hates me to go anywhere with Phil, and Phil had driven me over to a very nice place for a couple of dances. Only fifteen miles, but Gran'dad would just go to pieces if he knew that. We'd have been back before eleven but the car broke down. We had to walk in. Then I was afraid somebody around town would see us and tell Gran'dad, so I insisted on trying to get home a way I wouldn't be liable to meet anybody. I—I never did such a thing before and—Oh! I don't know why I'm explaining to *you*!" she concluded angrily.

"Neither do I," Jim replied. "Guess you must of wanted to."

"I did *not*!" she retorted with vigor. "I don't see why you couldn't have kept still, like a gentleman!"

"I hope I talked like a gentleman," Mallory said, half laughing. "If a girl saves your life, I think you have a right to thank her," he added seriously.

THEY were approaching the broadcasting station and he said nothing further. When they entered the lighted anteroom he saw that her cheeks were brightly flushed and her eyes were positively aglow. Phil Judson was waiting and he greeted Jim coolly.

"What's happened that's so exciting?" he asked Norma.

"Nothing," she said lightly.

"So 'nothing' makes you look like a Christmas tree, does it?" he said as he drew her

towards the control room. "Red holly in your cheeks and a hundred candles in your eyes."

"That's from hurrying," she retorted. "I came near being late."

"Hurrying because *I* was waiting?" he asked.

Mallory's keen ears caught the words and he glowered. Turning slightly, Norma glimpsed his expression and the red in her cheeks spread and deepened. "Ellie!" she called to a plump young woman checking records at a tall file. "I've brought a friend of Billy's, Jim Mallory," she indicated Jim with a gesture. "Please look after him while we go on the air."

Ellie came over to shake Jim's hand warmly. "I don't know what Dave and I would do without Norma," she said presently. "She's such a help with several of our local programs. Building up a station like this is a real problem. Phil is nice about singing, too. Come this way and you can see inside the control room, while you listen to their music through this loud speaker."

Norma was a picture as she sat at the piano, the light bringing out the rich tones in her hair. She didn't put on any side, just sat there as naturally as if she had been in the living room at home. But Phil Judson posed. You knew he thought he looked well and was a pretty damn good singer. He really wasn't bad, Jim had to admit. But he thought the little speech Judson made between songs sounded silly.

"I always think of this ballad as a Monday song," he said, "and here I am, going to sing it on a Wednesday. Next time I'll remember, and sing it Monday."

"Why emphasize it so heavy," Jim wondered, "as if those days were important?"

The second speech seemed like the babbling of a moron. "My last song is for any day, not just Monday or Wednesday," he said, going on with a silly patter about spring and flowers.

"My Lord!" Jim exclaimed to Ellie Vance. "What a lot of fuss about Monday and Wednesday!"

She laughed. "It's funny, come to think of it," she said. "He always says something about the days of the week, not always the same ones however. I believe that Sunday's the only one I never heard him mention. It's an odd little phobia."

When Norma and Phil came into the anteroom at the end of the quarter-hour, Jim saw that they were deep in an argument. Finally Phil seemed to yield his point and with a pleasantness that won him a smile from Norma. Then Jim heard her say, "Next time, Phil, that's a promise."

As she turned away, the shallow eyes shot a look at Jim that was anything but pleasant. He grinned back cheerfully.

Jeff Chandler and Rena were both in the living room when Norma and Mallory returned. The old man was in an excellent mood, and Rena seemed quite lively.

HE WAS in the midst of an anecdote when there came a clattering from the back yard and Chandler halted, to stare through the rear window from which the back yard was visible in the light of the newly risen moon. The double doors into the barn were dashed open and the sorrel horse came charging out, to race past the side of the house and on towards the street. Mane and tail streamed in the wind of his flight, and the loose stirrups swung wildly.

"Blondy!" Norma exclaimed.

"Hell's fire, howcome he done that!" Chandler burst out.

"D-did you s-see?" Rena quavered. "He w-was saddled."

"I seen," Jeff replied curtly.

"B-but nobody w-was in the s-saddle," she said, still more tremulously.

Chandler was making for the outside door. "Bring the flashlight, Normie," he said. "I'll take a look into this."

Jim was at his heels and both were in the yard before the beat of the running hoofs died away in the distance.

"He made for open country," Chandler said. "May go on to the ranch."

"Did he ever get out before?" Jim asked.

"Nope," Jeff replied, "and he's been kept in that barn for two winters, all the time we've lived in town."

By then they were standing on the threshold of the open doors. The bar that had confined them now lay on the ground.

"That was the clattering we heard," Norma said.

"Whoever saddled him and drove him out got away while we was getting to the door," Chandler said angrily. "I just wanta get my hands on him!"

Rena came up, her hands fluttering, clasping, then fluttering again.

"He—he couldn't have gotten away," she

said. "I never stopped looking out of the window till you all got to the barn."

"Well, he *did*," Jeff insisted sharply. "While we was watching Blondy run past the house. You can see for yourself that there ain't nobody inside here. That horse isn't smart enough yet to saddle and bridle himself!"

"That was Billy's saddle," Norma said, "It hasn't been used since he went away."

Jim had taken the big flashlight from Norma and was examining the box stall, then he went to the doorway and looked sharply at the ground beyond. Blondy's small hoofs had left marks and there were foot tracks where the four of them had walked. Nothing to indicate a stranger's presence.

"Dag nab it! How'd Blondy come to bolt?" Bogy demanded, trotting towards them from the cabin where he slept, over beyond the corral. "Thought I was dreamin' when I heard him, then I looked out and seen you folks."

"It's awful q-queer!" Rena stammered, going close to Norma and clinging to the girl's arm.

"Damn queer!" Chandler exclaimed angrily. "But we might as well go back into the house."

"I think I'd better try to find him," Norma suggested to her grandfather.

"You said yourself, the other day, that Billy said if anything happened to him, he'd come back even from—"

"Hush!" Jeff ordered, his voice harsh. "Hush and get back into the house. Not another word. I'll find out who did this and settle with him proper. Now it's time for all hands to turn in. No more talk, Rena. I won't have such nonsense in my house!" He gave his daughter an imperious look.

She fluttered ahead of them into the dwelling, hands clasped tightly together. She had vanished up the stairs when they entered.

"Normie will put out the lights," Chandler said. "Come on, Jim, you're going to bunk next to my room."

The two men ascended the stairs together. When they arrived under the light at the top, Jim saw that Jeff's face was drawn and grey. But his mouth was set firmly.

"Women's foolishness!" he muttered. "I'll find who done that stunt and beat the tar outa him!"

Almost as soon as his head touched the pillow, Jim fell asleep. He returned to consciousness by degrees, opened his eyes and saw that it still was night and a pale block of moonlight lay on the floor. At the same time he became aware of light sounds coming through his opened window. Somebody was in the yard.

"Nope," her grandfather said. "If he don't come back by mornin', you can trail him. He'd lead you a turrible chase, if you spotted him."

"Would he let a stranger saddle him?" Jim asked.

"We-ell, Blondy is easy handled if he's in the stall. He wouldn't let no stranger ride him, though. Fact is, I wouldn't wanta see anybody but Normie try."

"I d-don't like it," Rena murmured. "Being a m-moonlight night and all. And he went out of this yard just exactly as he used to when Billy rode him."

"What are you getting at?" Chandler demanded.

EASING from bed he quietly crossed the room and peeped out. Norma, in robe and slippers, stood a short distance from the house talking softly to the sorrel horse that stood head on one side, eyeing her curiously.

"Blondy," she said, "you're a darling to come home so soon. Come, Blondy, come on!"

The sorrel came slowly towards her. She extended a hand and caught hold of the bridle. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "That's Billy's old leather jacket tied behind the saddle. If you could only tell me who did it, Blondy, who took down that saddle and bridle and put them on you!" The low voice caught on a sob and she pressed her face against the shining mane.

"Who got Billy's jacket from the hook where he left it?"

Jim felt a tightening in his own throat. "That was a damn scoundrelly trick!" he muttered.

He watched until she led the horse into the barn, returning after a few minutes and carefully closing the doors. When she moved from sight, Mallory returned to his bed.

Why would anybody do such a thing, he wondered. It seemed as if there must have been some purpose, yet what that could be was a mystery. Merely to annoy the Chandlers didn't seem enough reason.

"Seems to be a good many things happening around this town that I can't figure out," he thought as he closed his eyes.

At the early breakfast Jeff Chandler declared his attention of remaining in town. "Gave myself a mite too big a day yesterday," he said ruefully. "No use talkin', Jim, old timbers wear out. You take the car and go on out to the ranch. Start in like you said. I'll get in touch with Forbes today and tell him I'll take on those fifty heifers he wants to sell. He's so anxious to clean everything up and pull out, that he's offerin' a darn good buy. Might pick up a few good saddle horses, too. Being's you're going to get so busy, we can use 'em."

Rena's eyelids were pink and she scarcely said a word while they sat at the table. Norma, too, was quiet, with an anxious, far-away look in her eyes.

"Will you drive in tonight?" Chandler asked Jim as they were leaving the table.

"Don't think so," he replied. "I want to ride on to that upper range and do quite a bit of scouting around."

"Good. We'll expect you tomorrow evening," the old man said.

Thinking that it was smoother driving, Jim took the road on which Jeff and he had returned the previous evening. This took him past the place that had aroused his curiosity. Again he noticed the tire marks in the driveway, and as he was passing he caught a sound from the group of buildings. Slowing, he listened. That particular sound wasn't repeated but he heard a horse squeal. No animal was visible in the open, however.

Arrived at the ranch house, he questioned the boys again. "Did you say there's nobody at Grove's place?" he asked.

"That's right," Spiffy Niles replied.

"And no stock?"

"Nary horse nor cow," Larry Breen declared. "I was through there last week, lookin' for some strays. Not a soul had been near this winter, I'm sure."

"But somebody strange was around here last night," Spiffy announced.

"That so? What'd he do?" Mallory asked.

"NOTHING but ride," Larry said. "We heard a horse galloping, and it woke us. It went around and around the yard, over to the c'ral they used to keep special for Blondy, here and there about the place a few times, then away like a streak."

"Blondy got loose last night," Jim said.

"Who was riding him?"

"Nobody."

"There was a fellow on this horse, all right," Spiffy said. "We saw him. And he had on some kind of a white uniform."

"Uniform?" Jim repeated.

"Sure, we could see it in the moonlight. We know all the young fellows left around here, and it wasn't none of them," Larry declared. "They're all too far from the Star C to be pulling that kind of a ride in the middle of the night."

"Some stranger," Jim said, dismissing the subject.

While he was riding, it recurred to his mind. And late that afternoon he was again reminded of the circumstance when he spied a rider going off into the distance and keeping carefully to the concealment of every possible tree and brush clump. Jim hadn't seen where he came from; the fellow merely became visible all of a sudden. But he could have started from the Grove place. And the way he was taking seemed to be a possible short cut to town.

Mallory came to an impulsive decision. Turning his own horse, he made for the supposedly unoccupied ranch. A half-hour later he was at the gate, which was not locked and swung easily open. No use to fasten it; anybody who was curious could climb the fence, he reasoned. He rode slowly into the yard. Even from the saddle it was plain that nobody had been near the big house. But when he neared the cabin where he had noted the trampled weeds, he spied a cigarette butt on the ground. Getting down, he peeped through a window. The curtains were drawn so his view was limited, but through a crack along one side he could see a bit of a bed that had the look of being in present use. And a boot lay

on the floor as if it had recently been dropped there.

Going around to the other side of the house, he found another peephole and through this could see an oil stove with a coffee pot on top.

"Ah-ha, that's why there's no smoke from a chimney," he thought.

Getting back in the saddle, he rode around the yard. And at the back he found fresh hoof-prints. These led to the center one of three buildings well back from the house. Two were newly built and all were stoutly locked. But sounds came from the interior of one. These were muffled and Mallory judged came from an inner room. Horses stomping in a stall made that kind of sound. Most certainly there were horses inside that building.

"I'm getting to be a regular snoop," he reflected as he rode around trying vainly to find a way of seeing the animals so securely confined.

People who had nothing that required hiding didn't make such mysteries, he believed. There were shenanigans going on that would bear an explanation. Mallory had a hunch that it was a good idea to investigate everything he didn't understand. And when he rode away from the Grove place, it was with a clear conscience.

And that night he slept without wakening. The next day he put in getting the boys started on certain jobs. Spiffy, who had a way of looking spruced-up in faded levis and a shabby hat, was best on details. Larry, curly-headed and happy-go-lucky, was willing but needed plenty of directing. Mallory got on excellently with both of them. When he was leaving he said, grinning teasingly, "I really think by the time you're fifty, you'll be good cowhands."

They grinned back.

ON THE way into Blanchard Jim found himself most impatient to reach the town house. It seemed a very, very long time since he had seen Norma. He was thinking a lot about her, more than he considered advisable. But heck, how could a fellow remember to be sensible when a pretty girl was involved?

"When she's a darn sight more than pretty," he reflected, "the case is hopeless." He smiled, picturing Norma with light shining on her richly shaded hair. Then he frowned, remembering Phil Judson.

But Norma had never told Jim Mallory that she was spoken for, and on that basis he was justified in thinking whatever he liked. And more and more, he liked thinking very seriously about Norma. The sticker was, could he get her to thinking about him in the same manner? Just how much did she like Phil Judson? How much of her interest in him was due to the fact that he knew how to talk to girls, and that Norma Chandler was discontented with things as they were, too limited in her opportunities? She was at war with circumstances, caught in a tangle that held her and from which she both did and did not wish to free herself.

When Jim had put the car in the garage end of the barn and turned towards the house, he saw Rena standing in the rear doorway. She beckoned to him. As he approached, she backed into the kitchen, her hands twisting together nervously. She had the appearance of a person forcing herself to meet a considerable ordeal, her pale blue eyes fixed on him entreatingly. She spoke in a low voice, as if fearful of being overheard, but it was taut as a violin string.

"Jim," she began, "I haven't a thing against you, but I'm asking you to please do as you had planned and go on to Arizona."

"You mean that you want me to break my promise to Jeff?" he asked.

"Yes," she assented. "You can tell him you changed your mind after you looked the ranch over more completely."

"I couldn't let Chandler down like that," he said.

"But you'll do him greater harm if you stay," she insisted. "It will be a terrible job, trying to bring back the ranch to anything like it used to be. Oh, I know it will! People who understand conditions now better than Pa does, have showed me that. He broke down under the burden and should drop it. It isn't a bit of use for him to go on, now Billy won't come back!"

"But we're not sure he won't," Jim protested.

"Oh, yes we are," she declared with a long, tremulous sigh. "It's just another of the things Father won't admit. He's fooling himself about everything, and you help him. I know you don't need to stay here. You can get a good job any place. Please go! *Please!*"

"I'm sorry you feel this way," Jim said gently. "I thought you were going to cooperate."

Rena's chin wobbled pitifully but she steadied herself. "I tried. I never went against Pa

before, in all my life," she said. "I never saw a thing beyond the boundaries of the Star C. But I've come to understand that everything is changed. Folks have to live for tomorrow, these days. I don't want Norma to be like me, that's why I'm standing by her now she has a chance to break away from all the things that tie her to a past that's gone. Pa's clinging to the ranch is plain silly, when maybe it wouldn't get so far out of the family after all. If you hadn't come when you did, he'd have given in, I know he would. And he'll get over it if you leave. He's got the strength to meet anything he must."

Jim probed her face with a sharp gaze. "Are you trying to tell me that if Norma marries Phil Judson, and his father buys the Star C, the ranch will eventually be part hers?" he asked.

"We-ell," she clasped her hands more tightly, "I can't help thinking about it that way, anybody would," she defended herself.

"Did Norma get you to ask me to pull out of here?"

"No, no!" Rena denied quickly, darting an alarmed look over her shoulder at the closed door into the dining room. "And she doesn't know a thing about my going to, either. But she's awful worried, too, about Father hangin' on to the ranch, since we're both sure Billy's gone."

Jim uttered a sharp exclamation. "Listen," he said sternly, "if you're thinking about Blondy getting out of the barn the other night, that was a trick. Nothing but human hands ever saddled him and let him loose."

"It was a sign!" she exclaimed, her voice rising excitedly. "Things happen in this world that nobody can explain. They ain't supposed to, you just have to *believe*. Some folks ain't so stubborn as you and Pa. Even Phil, who says he hasn't ever seen anything to make him believe personally in the supernatural, told me he can understand perfectly just how I feel."

"I'll bet he did!" Jim exclaimed sourly. "No, Rena, I'm not cutting loose from Jeff. I'm sticking."

"Why can't you see you're doing him, all of us, a wrong?" she wailed.

"It's you who's doing that," he replied.

AS HE spoke, steps neared the dining-room door and a firm hand grasped the doorknob.

"'Lo, Jim, thought I heard your voice out here!" Jeff Chandler exclaimed.

Rena whirled to stir something in a skillet on the stove. "Tell Norma to come and help me dish up," she said. "We're going to eat right now. I have to get ready to go out. I'm visiting the broadcasting station tonight."

"Hunnh!" Jeff snorted. "Going over there to hear that coyote howl, eh? Well, that's better than having you turn on the radio here and force me to listen to his yowling."

Swinging around, he strode to the staircase and called to Norma in a voice that betrayed his suppressed anger.

For the most part supper was eaten in silence. Rena ignored Jim and Norma evaded meeting his glances. Chandler asked no questions about the ranch until he went with Jim into the living room. Then he asked, "How's things shaping?"

"About as we figured," Jim replied. "Since you say you don't need Bogy around the place here all the time, think I'll take him out and let him loose on the odd jobs. There are lots of those to be done."

"Sure, sure," Jeff agreed heartily. "Can't scurcely wait to get settled back out there," he added, his voice taking on the grating note Jim sensed meant suppressed emotion. "D'you know, boy, I was about to let go all holds when you showed up. Just barkin' to keep up my courage and to try to make folks think I was still a big, strong feller that nothing could lick. But I'd sell to the devil himself, before I will to that money-hawg, Judson."

"Why is he so hell-bent to get hold of the place?"

"'Cause he's set his mind on it, I guess, and ain't used to being crossed," Chandler replied. "I never had nothing to do with him. He's part of the gang of new folks here that's determined to swaller the whole Blanchard country. Grafters and grabbers, the pack of 'em. Judson bought the *Leader* and fired all the old hands, includin' a feller who'd set up

that paper for thirty years. Brought in men *he* says is top of their class. But they don't print no local news that interests the old-timers no more, and Judson ain't got no use for anybody that's been here for mor'n five or six years. May the Old Nick fry him, say I!"

"Don't blame you for feeling that way, from the one glimpse I had of him," Jim said. "Especially since he reminds you of somebody you hated."

"He sure did, t'other day, the first time I ever had a close look at him," Chandler declared. "Got a beak just like Ed Boynton's, a crook that did plenty of stealin' around here, from cows to holdups, finally killin' a feller. When I was the means of gettin' him caught, he was venomous as a rattler. Went to the pen swearin' that when he got out, he'd hit straight back here and clean me of everything I had, kick me outa the country. Hunnh! When he did get out, fifteen years later, him and his son went over a cliff into the ocean, in their car. It was bought with stolen money he'd cached out, like enough, and served him right it was his coffin."

"You don't have to sell to this Judson bird if you don't want to," Jim grinned cheerfully. "Forget him."

"That's right, boy, I don't need to," the old man replied with a lift of his shoulders that seemed to cast off weight. "But women sure are riddles," he muttered. "You can live in the house with one for nigh forty-five years and not once will she kick up her heels, then all of a sudden she goes off on a turrible tear."

IGNORING this mumbled remark he knew referred to Rena, Jim rose from his chair and started for the door.

"Got an erand or two downtown," he said. "But first I'll tell Bogy about going with me in the morning."

The old cowpuncher was sitting on the step of the little cabin beyond the corral. "I was hopin' you'd need me at the ranch," he said. "Nope," he replied to a casually put question. "There ain't no way into the back of the barn excepting through a window that's got heavy wire net nailed over the inside. You can see, if you step over here."

"What about that door above?" Jim asked.

"We put hay through there into the loft," Bogy replied. "It fastens with a hook inside."

Going to the wall of the building, Mallory set his foot on a projecting stone of the foundation, then to the sill of the glassless window. Balancing there, he reached up a hand to thrust the fingers into a crack at the corner of the loft door. He gave this a tug and it moved slowly outward. Ducking around it, Mallory swung himself into the loft.

"Dag nab it!" Bogy exclaimed, staring up at him.

"If the door was fastened, anybody could slip in the front way, run up here and lift the hook so he could get in later without danger of being seen from the house—also get away in a hurry."

Drawing a flashlight from his pocket, he

took a look around the dusty interior, then swung himself back to the window-sill and closed the door.

"As easy as that," he said. "Do you ever go up there without boots on?"

"Nobody around this place wears anything else, except the women," Bogy replied.

"Thought so," Mallory said. "Keep your lip buttoned about this. And leave that door unlocked. Wish Blondy would get out again, but I don't look for that stunt to be repeated."

"What do you figger?" Bogy asked. "Who dunnit?"

"Suppose we say a person who wanted to make Rena, and maybe Norma, think it was some kind of ghost business."

"Scare 'em, you mean?" Bogy's voice and expression were fierce.

"Not that so much as to give them the belief that Billy has been killed," Jim replied.

"The dirty whelp!" Bogy spluttered wrathfully.

"Sh, sh!" Mallory cautioned. "Not a word to anybody!"

RETURNING to the house, he ran upstairs to his room. From the bottom of his bag he removed the gun he had captured the night he was attacked in the alley. Thrusting this in his belt, he buttoned his leather jacket about him in order to conceal the weapon.

The building that housed the jail and sheriff's office was in the block beyond that containing the hotel and *Leader* building. Mallory stepped along briskly, making mental notes of the items he wanted to take up with the county officer.

Nate Owens was a big, loose-jointed man of quiet manner and calm blue eyes. He gave Jim a friendly nod as the cowboy entered the office. Mallory laid the .38 on the desk before him.

"I took that from a fellow who tried to shoot me, the other night," he said.

"Know who he was?" The sheriff asked, examining the gun without change of expression.

"Too dark to get a look at him," Jim replied.

"Anything more you wanta tell me?" Owens asked.

Mallory gave a brief account of the assault, to which the sheriff listened in silence, eyes still calm. Then he said, "I guess you must be the young fellow Bogy Kemp and Doc Purdy packed over from the railroad a few nights ago."

"That's me," Jim replied.

"I'd be interested in your story about that," Owens remarked, turning to give Mallory a direct and penetrating look. Jim now sensed there was keen attention behind the surface serenity of the blue eyes.

After Mallory had finished, omitting any reference to Norma, Owens said, "I'd be interested if you got around to identifying that lighted garage you saw. Yes, I do know what Royal Stacey looks like. Never saw him here but once, some time ago. But he travels around a good bit, even if he never manages to hit Blanchard. He's in great demand for speechmaking, tellin' the other feller what to do, you know, and how to live his life strictly accordin' to Hoyle. A pile of folks lap up that truck."

Jim nodded. Then he asked the officer if he had known Ez Boynton.

"I sure did," was the reply. "A real bad egg."

The quiet voice and unruffled manner gave punch to the simple statement.

"You believe that the report of his death was true?" Mallory then asked.

"It was well authenticated at the time," the officer replied. "Newspapers carried stories about it for weeks. Boynton's widow put in a claim for the son's life insurance and the company did a pile of checkin'. The car went over the cliff in the teeth of a big storm. It was badly beaten against the rocks. Not much left for evidence—of anything. But such as was, was accepted finally, I'm sure. What you got on your mind?"

"A resemblance," Jim said, frowning thoughtfully.

"Them's tricky things," the sheriff commented. "I've run across some myself that I'm holdin' in my mind, just in case. You keep on noticing anything you find interesting around Blanchard. And watch yourself. Fellers like the one that owned that gun don't give up too easy. I'll see what I can do checking about that."

Turning in his chair, he twirled the dial of a small radio. "I generally get the news around this time," he said.

Following a low hum of sound came a languorous tenor voice.

"Good night, friends," it said. "I'll be with you again not later than Monday evening, next Monday on your calendar."

"Good Lord!" Jim exclaimed. "That gink's still got Monday on his brain."

"That's Phil Judson," the sheriff remarked. "He's quite a crooner. And he could be a damned good cowhand, the way he rides. As it is, he just seems to fool around. The old man had dough when he hit here and he makes a good thing out of that printing outfit, does all sorts of sideline stuff. Good, too. Both engraving and printing. Brought in experts and they work overtime lots of nights."

"That so?" Jim said indifferently, thinking the old officer was inclined to garrulity. Yet he sensed real astuteness behind the quiet front. And he had a feeling that the sheriff was hinting that he should go out and make it his business to locate the garage. Also that Owens thought there was something real behind the attack.

"Drop in any time," he invited when Mallory was leaving. "I'm mostly around, and I like to have a talk about whatever's new."

"Thanks, I'll remember," Jim replied, again sensing a hidden meaning in the sheriff's simple words.

RETRACING his steps, he dropped into a saloon that had a fair crowd lined along the bar. The men looked like a representative bunch of the town's citizens and he wanted to size them up. Also he had a desire to mingle in a friendly way with his own kind. It had been so long since he could stroll into one of the places so characteristic of small towns in his home country. Made it seem real that the war was partly won. He hadn't had time to settle down normally since his discharge. Being out on the ranch was great, exactly what he wanted for occupation. But it was great, too, to come into town and be part of the ordinary evening crowd along Main Street.

The beer he ordered had been set before him when he had the sensation that he was being watched. It was that peculiar feeling, like nothing else, which warns that eyes are fixed upon one. Extending a hand to his glass, he glanced casually around, his gaze flicking over the narrow room with apparent indifference. Nobody seemed to be noticing him. As he turned back to the bar, glass at his lips, he glimpsed watchful eyes sizing him up in the mirror. They belonged to a pair near the farther end of the bar, who stood turned towards each other, slightly aloof from anybody else. Jim did not permit his own glance to linger on their reflected faces and carefully held a poker expression.

But he knew that he had never seen them previous to that time. And he thought their features were as hard and cold as cast steel. While they did not look alike they had the same inscrutable, ice-grey eyes, the same granite jaws and hard mouths. They were talking, yet he could catch no decided movement of their lips.

When the man at Jim's right made a friendly remark, Mallory replied, then asked in a mildly curious manner, "Do you know those two fellows at the end of the line, on my left?"

"Yeah," he assented. "They're the kingpins in the Blanchard *Leader* staff. Tallest one's named Oakley, the one with the crooked nose is Zuver. They're from back East some place. Don't mix much around town."

Mallory gathered the idea that neither was liked. And he didn't wonder. Never had he seen a tougher-looking pair of birds. Not that there was anything rough about their dress or manner, it was in the essential hardness of their personalities.

"Couldn't dent either one of 'em," he thought. "They'd cut your heart out without a quiver. They're the quiet kind to look out for. Wonder what their game is, for they've got one. That sort never work hard with anything but their wits. If they're dishing out any real labor now, it's a cover, I'll bet."

They were moving away from the bar towards the doorway. And Mallory knew as clearly as if they had told him, that he was the object of their particular interest. Sizing them up for height and body structure, he could not decide whether either had been his assailant of the other night.

He lingered for a few moments after they passed from view, then took his own departure. They were not visible on the street. Mallory proceeded on his way towards home. He had gone but a short distance when pedestrians in front of him parted, affording view of a trio approaching from farther along the block. No girl he had seen in town had that particular lift of her head. And the slender, droopy woman could only be Rena. Walking between them was Phil Judson, strikingly attired as usual and alternately bending his head to one, then the other of his two companions.

Mallory did not want to meet them. On impulse, he ducked into a nondescript sort of place that bore the name "Dan's Nite Spot." There was a bar across the rear, sort of a

soda fountain at one side, a bunch of vari-sized tables and two rows of booths, with even a small space for dancing to juke box music. When he got inside, Jim saw that the patrons were of all ages and both sexes. When he glanced out into the street to check on the passing of the trio, almost at once he saw them entering the doorway. He backed into a nearby booth, trusting to the duskiness of its interior to screen him from recognition.

NORMA was giving Phil Judson her attention. That of her aunt was divided between listening to their escort and staring curiously down the length of the sizeable room. It was evident that she was unaccustomed to visiting any such places for amusement, and more than a little excited over the experience.

To Jim's annoyance they turned to come close to his retreat and he wished he had not attempted to hide. Then they had passed without glancing his way. But to his exasperation, they turned into the adjoining booth. At the same moment a girl appeared to take his order. Even less desirous than before of attracting attention, he ordered a beer in a low voice. He had no intention of remaining to listen in on their party. As soon as the little waitress returned with his drink, he would pay her and get out.

He heard Aunt Rena's fluttering voice ask for a lemonade. Norma ordered ginger ale and Judson took the same. Rena Chandler was plainly in a state of considerable excitement.

"I feel like Fourth of July and Christmas all together," she said. "It was wonderful watching you sing, Phil, and knowing how many people were listening, how happy you were making them all. I don't need any air plane rides to give *me* a thrill after that!"

"But you do want to fly, Norma?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," she replied, her voice sending tremors up and down Jim's spine. "Just once, so I can know how it felt to Billy. He—he had promised to take me up once, when he came back."

"Well, I believe I can fix that up for you," Judson said. "I have a friend that brings a plane this way quite frequently. He'd be glad to take us up."

"Gran'dad will never let me," she sighed.

"Not just to go up a little ways, for a few minutes?" he urged. "Not if you tell him how much you want to?" Judson's voice adapted itself to a half caressing, half pleading note that caused Jim to grind his teeth.

"That wouldn't make any difference," she said. "He'd think me crazy to even dream of such a stunt."

"Well, why do you tell him?" Rena asked with a reckless boldness completely out of character for her. "I'm sure Phil wouldn't suggest it if it wasn't safe. You'd be back on the ground so quick it couldn't possibly be any harm. You're almost twenty years old, Norma, and can decide some things for yourself."

"My God!" Jim groaned inwardly. "Rena's all out for that gink. And for the romance she didn't get herself."

"It would be an awful temptation," Norma laughed shakily, "to go up in the air like Billy did so many times." Her voice broke, then she went on, "But it isn't likely to happen."

"We'll see, the next time Farrer comes this way," Judson said.

When the beer was set before him, Jim handed the waitress a coin and under cover of the stir as she served the next booth, he slipped away. He wanted to spring around the end of the little enclosure and yank Phil Judson out by the collar. The fellow was insufferable. Take Norma up in a plane, indeed! Before that should happen, Jim would himself appeal to her grandfather. He'd bet the old boy would stop that nonsense, especially if Mallory spilled what he suspected about the Judsons. True or false, that would set the old man wild.

THE NEAR encounter had so upset him that Jim was no longer of a mind to head for his room and turn in. Hesitating for a moment, he turned back and went to the corner where the *Leader* building stood. Following the cross street along the side of this, he turned again and struck into the open lots at the rear of the line of business buildings.

The moon had not yet risen but myriads of stars in a cloudless night sky did considerable to relieve the darkness. When he was satisfied there was nobody about, he drew out his flashlight and played the beam over the rear wall of the *Leader* building. The back of the basement evidently contained two sizeable garages. The doors to both were closed and securely fastened—on the outside, he noted, which indicated there was no inside way from them to the front part of the basement.

The longer he reflected, the more certain he

became that it was one of these garages he had seen lighted. Whether they were rented to outside tenants or in use by someone connected with the newspaper, was a question. Abandoning his search, Mallory went slowly towards Main Street. As he reached the corner he saw two men mounting the wide steps to the entrance of the *Leader* building. They did not appear to notice him as one inserted a key in the lock and swung the door open.

"I'm sick of staying here nights," one said. "He'll have to get a watchman."

"He said he would after the stuff's all out, Zuver," the second man declared as he followed his mate inside.

Like a shadow Jim slid up the steps into the gloom of the porticoed doorway. Half of the double door was on the latch. He could hear footsteps and voices inside and cautiously widened the crack. The two men had not yet made a light.

"Leave me that bottle when you go," the one he had heard called Zuver was saying.

"You're drinking too much," the other retorted. "You know the old man won't stand for a drunkard."

"The hell with him!" Zuver rasped. "Where'd he be without us, I ask you? Get hep to yourself, Oak."

"I am," the reply was a surly growl. "That's why I don't want you hitting a bottle all night."

They moved farther in and Jim could no

longer distinguish words. Without thought of possible consequences, he eased inside the anteroom and on to the shelter of the tall information desk. What kind of stuff was to be taken out, he wondered, stuff that called for special watching? Maybe he could get onto the reason for the attempts to rub him out, with a line on the would-be murderers. It was one thing to be a target in the Service of the United States. Jim Mallory had no intention of passing over lightly what had happened to him since he hit Blanchard.

The voices had moved on along the passageway he had noted the day he'd visited the office. On either side he recalled doors into private offices. They seemed to have entered one of these and Mallory stole quietly in their wake.

"Think it'll all go out by Wednesday?" Zuver asked.

"Naw, too much of it," was the reply. "But Monday and Wednesday both should make a big dent in it."

The sudden shooting of a wide beam of light into the pasageway caused Jim to duck sideways. The door behind him yielded and he slid through to the shelter of one of the offices.

"Here's the stuff the old man said to give Hawk to take to the ranch," Zuver said. "Tell him to be damn careful where he keeps it till that bloke comes for it."

They were back in the passageway now and Jim eased farther from the doorway, holding his breath when they halted outside. What if they took it into their heads to come in there? Unconsciously he backed farther, his extended hand coming in contact with what felt like a big, flat-topped desk. He rested the hand on its top and to his consternation the desk slid away from him with mysterious ease and noiselessness. He lost balance, so suddenly did the desk recede. To prevent stumbling steps, he dropped down to squat on his heels, taut and ready to spring in any direction.

His situation was none too pleasant. Certainly he had barged into a tight spot once too often. If he were caught snooping in here, it required no agility of imagination to picture what would happen. If he got out of here, Jim would quit sleuthing for good.

NOW THE talk of the two men outside the door made no sense. And each sixty seconds added materially to his strain. Cautiously he shifted his weight, easing one foot, then the other. He hadn't the least idea what particular move he made, what he touched, but the floor started settling down beneath him, then it tilted far too suddenly for comfort, and he felt himself scooted off and down into the blackest pocket anybody could imagine. He landed in a sitting position and wasn't too jarred as there seemed to be considerable paper beneath him. Above his head he heard a slight sound, a mere stirring of the air, then he had the sensation of being enclosed in a vacuum. Nowhere was there any further sound except the increasing rasp of his breathing as his tension increased. Where the devil was he?

Reaching for his flashlight, Mallory pressed the button. No answering radiance came. His

weight when he landed had put that light out for good. Standing up, he extended his arms. Then he discovered that he was in a closet-like space no more than four feet wide. On one side was a concrete wall, on the other it felt like metal. Both were discouragingly solid, he discovered as he felt along them, estimating the length of his cell at the same time. It seemed to be ten or a dozen feet. The floor space was broken into by cardboard boxes filled with papers. He stood and moved about on paper.

He discovered a bench and a folded blanket, then a jug that contained water. For the Lord's sake, had he fallen into somebody's hide-out? Where was the usual occupant? It fairly made Jim's hair stand on end to imagine anybody sliding in as he had and discovering him in possession. This kind of thing had taken a heap of planning and carrying out. Something pretty big was at stake.

Stepping on the bench, he found he could reach the ceiling with ease, and long minutes of investigation discovered no knob or button that might release the ceiling and send it to tilting as it had when he'd made entry.

At least he wouldn't smother, though that reflection wasn't completely soothing. There seemed scant doubt that he could be found here, a distinctly unpleasant probability.

Seating himself on the bench, Jim attempted to think clearly. His thoughts had taken to a desperate hopping about that made no sense. He *must* get out of there, and under his own power. It didn't stand to reason that there was no way of escape. Or had the horrible place been constructed to act as a prison? For a few seconds that possibility brought panic.

When his pulses had slowed their pounding, he stood up and commenced a systematic covering of every inch of the side walls. No place could he discover a catch. But he did find what might be a keyhole in the very edge of the metal wall. Or it might merely be a tiny round hole. Into this he tried thrusting a pencil that happened to be in his jacket pocket. This promptly broke off, leaving an end inside.

When hopelessness was descending over him, he discovered a series of narrow steps on one of the end walls. These were a part of the masonry and afforded a small foothold. But Jim's heart beat fast with new-born courage. That was the way out. Standing on one, he reached upward and pressed against the ceiling, twisting and turning every way he could to bring pressure in different spots. Several times he was obliged to give up and rest. And once he was sure somebody walked across the floor of the room above.

FOR SOME time after that he desisted from all efforts, sitting silently on the bench. When he stepped on the narrow foothold to make a final atempt at escape, he rested a hand on the top one of the narrow steps. And there, at one end, his fingers encountered a button. Perspiration beaded his forehead as he pressed this firmly. At once he was conscious of that silent stirring above his head and, reaching up, felt a section of the ceiling tilting, settling against the wall on one side. Scarcely waiting to listen for a possible foe in the upper room, he drew himself out. For a moment his head whirled and he was obliged to crouch where he was. Yet he knew that the piece of the floor went into place. And he waited for some time, listening tensely. There was no other sound in the building.

Evidently the second man had taken his departure. But where was Zuver? From what point did he keep guard? Did he sleep and rely on some sort of burglar alarm system?

Mallory removed his boots. He was by no means out of the woods yet. It was going to take careful maneuvering to get his skin safely out of this place. Grasping the footgear, the only weapon he had, in his right hand, Mallory made for the point he believed the door into the hall to be. And his sense of location was correct. The door was there and a quarter of the way open, as he had left it.

Outside, the passage was silent. At the end opening into the anteroom he heard a light sound, like a clock ticking. And dimly he discerned street noises. If he only knew where the watchman kept himself.

Stealing forward an inch at a time, he finally found himself in the edge of the room containing the information desk. Now he could see the front windows. There was the street. There were people out there. Maybe not so many at that late hour, but some traffic was still passing the building.

Still inching his way, Mallory made for the front doorway. It was the only exit he knew of. And observation during the day had told him the building had barred windows through which there could be no departure for a nearly six-foot young fellow who was properly proportioned.

When he at last reached the door, he stood listening in a final attempt to locate the other

occupant of the *Leader* building. Perhaps the guard was waiting to pounce on him as he made a dash from the door. At any rate, the effort must be made. Gently Jim's fingers explored the lock. There was a chain bolt. He softly drew that back. Then his fingers found the big brass knob. He turned this and the door gave inward, ever so slowly under his gently urging fingers. Holding his breath, he sidled through the opening, then thrust the door back into its casing. But the big knob wouldn't turn from the outside, now the night lock was on. And Mallory dared not use force. There was nothing for it but to leave the door open.

Holding it with one hand to keep it in place, he hastily got into his boots, then made a bolt for it into the now almost deserted street. And he knew that never in his life had he run as he did when he struck the pavement. He went like a streak past the neighboring stores, not halting until he came near the entrance of a lighted saloon, where he slowed.

Glancing back, he saw no evidence of pursuit. Had the watchman discovered the open door, he would have given the alarm. It no longer mattered, Mallory was far enough away to be unsuspected.

He had gotten out of that jackpot by the skin of his teeth. If anybody caught him snooping again, he'd deserve whatever he got!

The Chandler house was in darkness save for a low night light in the living room. Jim entered quietly, the old clock at the stairfoot chiming three silvery strokes as he made his cautious ascent.

Jim did not ponder what he should do about his discoveries. The instant his head touched the pillow, he was asleep.

IT SEEMED no more than five minutes later when he heard the breakfast bell. Rolling over, he looked at the window where the first sunbeam was peeping in. A quick blinking of his heavy eyelids, then Mallory was fully awake. And at once he remembered the events of the previous night. With memory came consciousness that something should be done about it. Owens should know. For something more than ordinarily serious was afoot. Word must be gotten to the county officer, though Jim was anxious to be on the way to the ranch. And he did not want to take Chandler into his confidence. The fewer people who knew what was afoot until the showdown, the better.

Rena's cheeks were pink that morning and her manner unusually self-assertive. Indeed she showed an almost active aversion to Jim Mallory.

"I had a wonderful time last night," she declared, not much dashed when there was no comment beyond Chandler's "Hunnh! So did I, getting a good sleep."

"Why don't you drive out with us this morning?" Jim asked Norma. "The boys will have some good horses in the corral. You could take a nice ride. It looks great around the country now."

"No, thanks," she replied, indifferently. "I expect to see enough of the Star C this summer."

She had a more standoffish manner than she had displayed at any time. Mallory couldn't figure why she should be mad at him. Not that she displayed any active feeling, but she was different.

"Damn that Phil Judson anyhow!" he fumed inwardly. "Why in hell should a girl fall for him? I can't believe it's just money that affects Norma, she's too fine for that. It's that devilish technique of his. I've seen his kind in operation before and they sure slay the women. Maybe it's a little bit of contrariness with her. She knows her grandfather is out for Judson's scalp, and I can see he's drawn a pretty tight rein on her. Norma's got to sort of caper around and show she can do as she pleases, before she settles down."

When they had eaten breakfast, Mallory went to the telephone and quietly gave the sheriff's number. "Not there?" he said, when a strange voice replied. "Be back around noon? Okay, give him a message from me. Tell Owens that Jim Mallory located that place he wanted to know about. And that there's a moving job due for next Monday or Wednesday night. I'll be back in town Sunday at the latest, and see the sheriff."

Owens would be able to figure something from that, and it was the gist of Jim's discoveries, anyhow.

ON THE drive to the ranch, he was silent. Various pieces of the puzzle were shifting into spots they seemed to fit. Somebody was staying on a ranch, and the fellow Oakley had given him something to pass on to still another man. That savored of undercover stuff and at once suggested the mysterious occupant of the small house on the Grove place. Mallory would remember

to tell Owens about that. Everything was mixed together. Jim believed Phil Judson himself had released Blondy. The old rancher had probably supplied the idea for that stunt, when he broke out in anger at Henry Judson the day the latter made his offer for the ranch.

Judson could easily have got whoever was hiding out at the Grove ranch to do the stunt over at the Star C. The fellow was smart only to a point, not one to match wits against a really clever man. But Jim had an idea most crooks were like that, smart in spots. Not many of them long evaded detection. And he had an idea Phil Judson's personal conceit was a factor working against his keenness.

But he dismissed these thoughts when they arrived at the ranch.

"You know how it used to look around here before the war played hell with the place," he told Bogy. "I want you to set in and do everything you can between now and next Wednesday or Thursday, when the family will move out, to get the premises back to that old appearance."

"Dag nab it, won't I just do that!" Bogy exclaimed with enthusiasm. "There's paint in the store closet and I'll spruce up the well. Rena always wanted it kept bright green and glistening white. Said it made the water taste better. It ain't been done for three years. I see you had the boys fix the corrals, and that big gate."

"Yes, there's not so much has to be done out on the range this week. I've got things lined up and there'll be plenty later on. But we can take time to doll up the home premises and that's what will hit Jeff right spang between the eyes. It'll make the whole setup seem made over from what it was and sort of represent what's going to happen all over the place. I hope this will be a real homecoming."

"I'll say it will," the old cowpuncher said heartily. "Never hoped to see this day, Jim, and we wouldn't if you hadn't come along."

"Nonsense, I haven't done a thing—yet," Mallory protested.

"Naw, you hain't," Bogy said drily. "Just made a new man of Jeff, that's all."

"And made the women mad as hell," Jim grinned.

"Don't you mind Rena," Bogy advised. "She's feeling awful rebellious and it seems like a woman has got to go off on a mutiny once at least. Shows she's got spunk. And Norma'll come out of it. Them two had a tough time the last coupla years, worrying

about the future. And I've noticed a gal is awful inclined to get skittish when she really likes a feller. You've gotta tame 'em, Jim, same's you do a colt. Be firm, then coax 'em, sort of turn and turn about. And never let 'em see they've got you buffaloed."

"I s'pose all this wisdom about the female of the species is the cause of you being a bachelor," Jim grinned.

"Naw," Bogy sighed, shaking his head lugubriously, "it's because I got that smartness too late in life. I let the gals scare me when I was young and desirable." His smirk brought a shout from Jim.

Mallory was away from the house most of the day but Bogy worked steadily there and around the yard, aided by Spiffy. The result of their efforts was apparent by the time night fell.

"Things are all in better shape than they appeared," he declared. "The place had always been well kept up, that's why all hands were so discouraged when they saw it commence to slip. Outward appearances have a tremendous moral effect."

SUNDAY noon they returned to town and took the two young cowboys with them. Rena had a big dinner and there was so much disturbance Jim couldn't get a personal word with Norma. But he gathered the impression she was still standoffish. That nettled him and his own manner cooled.

Immediately after his arrival, Jeff had told him that Sheriff Owens wanted him to drop around as soon as he had his dinner. Chandler

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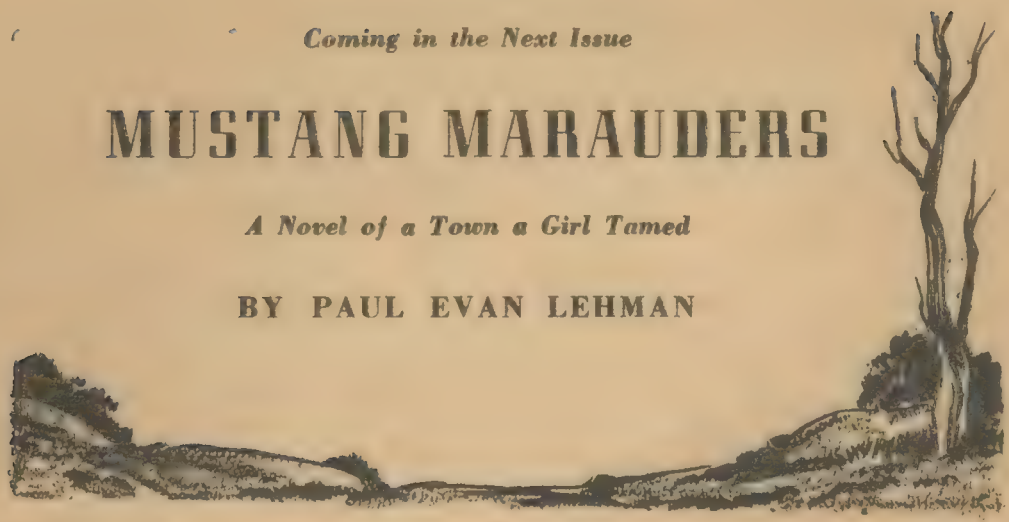


asked no questions, but Mallory guessed he was curious. Mallory would be glad when he could speak out, particularly on account of his strong hunch that the information was going to have especial significance for Jeff.

In response to the sheriff's questions, Jim gave an account of his experience in the *Leader* building. Owens listened in silence, only shaking his head occasionally.

"Any idea what Zuver and Oakley meant by the stuff that's to be moved out?" he asked.

"No, I wondered what sort of loot it can be," he replied. "I did think of dope; there's supposed to be lot of it being distributed. But I think that's a bum hunch."

"Maybe interest you to know that both them birds have done time," Owens observed. "I've been suspicioning something like that and had set inquiries afoot before you come. And I'll bet the fellow Hawk is the bird that was mixed up in that murder of a doctor in Phoenix, last year. He got off, but everybody knew he was a real bad actor. I have him lined out to be the one that attacked you. Things is tying up real nice," the sheriff concluded.

"What do you think is going to happen?" Jim asked.

"Dunno," Owens replied easily. "But calc'late it'll bust loose around next Monday or Wednesday."

The repetition of the two weekday names suddenly struck a chord of memory. "Say!" Mallory exclaimed. "Do you suppose Phil Judson kept repeating those names for a purpose?"

"What purpose?"

"Information as to what days to show up for something," Mallory said. "People could easily listen to that broadcast. It's safer than any message by phone or wire and can be picked up over a wide radius, even by anybody moving along in a car."

"You may be right," Owens conceded, his eyes sharpening. "I'll watch every one of Phil's broadcasts. from now on. You could spread a warnin' that way, too, mighty easy. It's a thought, boy, and you're the smart one to catch on."

When Jim left, he wasn't in a mood to return to the house, where it would be tantalizing to encounter Norma in her mood of that day. He'd let her alone for a while.

Strolling idly along he spied the saloon where he had first seen the two men from the *Leader* staff. Jim turned in again. This time he stood at the far end of the bar. A telephone booth was just beyond and someone was talking with the door open.

"I'm going to make that trip over into Utah," a voice said. "May have to bring the passengers back, but Phil thinks they'll come back by train. Yes, we're starting at three sharp, from the little field outside town here. The stunt's sure costing him plenty, but I guess he thinks it's worth it. 'Bye. Be seeing you day after tomorrow."

A youngish fellow in an aviator's outfit emerged from the booth and went hastily to the door. The hands of the clock on the wall stood at half past two.

What Mallory had overheard hovered in the

edge of his mind without making any clear impression. He was strolling along the street a few minutes later when the words first held significance. Phil Judson passed, driving his car, with Norma in the seat beside him. Her cheeks were bright pink and she had a look of excitement. They turned at the corner and went in the direction of the small local landing field.

Instantly Jim Mallory recalled the conversation about flying which had occurred between Norma and Phil Judson. Was that what they were on their way to do now, to go up in a plane? And just what had that fellow said about Utah and his passengers maybe returning by train?

Mallory dallied to think no further. He legged it for home with great leaps that fairly ate up the distance. Within three minutes he was at the house, bursting into the kitchen to find it empty, then bounding upstairs calling Rena's name imperatively.

"Yes?" she replied from her room. "What is it?"

"Where has Norma gone?" he demanded from the door.

"Why, for a ride, I guess," she said.

"What sort of a ride?" Jim insisted. "Answer me, Rena or there's going to be a pile of trouble."

"D-don't holler so loud," she entreated, opening the door hastily. "She'll be back in a few minutes. It's none of your business, anyhow!"

"She's going up in a plane with Phil Judson, isn't she?"

"W-why, I-I d-don't exactly know," Rena faltered. "Sh, sh!"

"What's that about Norma?" Jeff Chandler bellowed from the living room below, where he had been taking a nap. "Speak out, Rena!"

Jim was already springing down the stairs. "I get it," he called back. "You do the explaining. I haven't got time."

Through the house he raced, out the back door and across the yard, feeling in his pocket for the car keys as he shot into the garage. Tearing open the door, he flung himself into the seat and in a second the motor was turning over.

ALONG the street the car raced, around the corner on two wheels, dust spewing back in a great balloon. He could see the flat of the landing field ahead, the winged plane squatting like a great bird. And there was the big blue Judson car at one side. Jim stepped on the gas so hard he catapulted into the field, coming to a stop that came near wrecking him. He sprung to the ground as Norma and Phil Judson went close to the plane. It was aquiver, its engine throbbing, ready to take flight.

"Norma!" Jim burst out. "Jeff wants you, right away."

"Oh, he does?" she said coldly. "Well, he'll have to wait a little while." Turning, she went on.

Jim leaped to her side. "You don't understand," he said, his voice low now, but there was no doubt of its tautness. "Jeff asks you to come immediately. He—he needs you."

"I am not going," she said determinedly. "Are we ready to start?" she turned to ask Phil, chin up, a set smile on her lips.

"Sure, right now," he said, darting a triumphant leer at Mallory.

Jim laid a hand on Norma's arm. "Please," he entreated, "understand this is serious and don't make me say any more."

"Let go of her!" Phil commanded furiously. "You damn buttinsky!"

"No," Mallory said, "she's not going up in that plane."

"But I am!" Norma exclaimed, fire burning in her cheeks and hazel eyes.

Mallory stepped in front of them, between them and the waiting plane. "You asked for it," he told Norma. "You think you're just going up a few thousand feet, circle around a few times and come down."

"We are," Judson put in. "That's just what we're going to do."

"No, you're not. You're going to go over into Utah before you ground. Then you figure on bringing Norma back by train."

"That's a lie!" Judson raved.

"It's the truth, isn't it?" Jim demanded from the listening pilot. "Come, don't try to lie. I heard you talking on the phone in that saloon."

"Phil, that isn't true, say it isn't!" Norma implored, her cheeks gone white. "The shock would kill Gran'dad. Why, we wouldn't get back before tomorrow!"

The pilot suddenly took a hand. "Sorry, miss," he said, "I didn't understand the setup. Jud told me you only wanted a chance to get married. I was to pretend trouble in landing and that would give you a chance to elope—you know, the folks at home couldn't stop you."

"Phil Judson!" Norma cried. "How could you do such a thing?"

"Because I love you so much I'm going crazy!" he exclaimed, giving Jim a lowering look. "And you love me, I know you do. I thought this would clear the situation and make it easy for you."

"Easy!" she gasped. "I'll never forgive you! Nor you, either!" she whirled to assure Jim Mallory. "Spying on me, running to Gran'dad with tales. I despise you! Don't speak to me. Get in that car and get out of here." She headed for the blue car. "Phil, drive me home!" she commanded.

Suddenly Jim saw red, a brilliant, defiant scarlet. Norma was going to drive back with the fellow who put up that kind of a game on her? Never! Not while Jim Mallory had two good arms.

He sprang after her, so angry he was past reasoning.

"Out of my way!"

GRABBING Phil by the collar he flung him over against his car. Then he grabbed Norma before she guessed what he meant to do, swung her across his shoulder and sprang for the Chandler car. She writhed and kicked but he gripped her too firmly for her fighting to take effect. Into the front seat she went with Jim at her side. The engine was still running and he was turning the automobile before she could whirl and attempt escape.

"I wouldn't, if I were you," he said between gritted teeth. "I'll just jump out and grab you again, if you get out."

"You—you—" she gasped and choked with fury.

"You aren't a damn bit madder than I am," he told her, his eyes blazing. "I swear that swine isn't going to drive you one foot of the way home." The car was gaining momentum as he raved. "And I'll break his neck if he interferes!"

Norma drew away from him, holding herself taut against the side of the car. Fury stabbed him from the depths of her hazel eyes, and her red lips twisted with the flaming words she bit back.

Speechless, they drove on, through the town and into the yard of the Chandler house. There Norma flung herself from the car and darted for the kitchen door. He made no move to follow her.

"That settles me with her," he thought hopelessly. "She'll never forgive that."

But he knew he would do it over again. In the white heat of such anger, he could have put no restraint on himself. Right or wrong, Jim Mallory went ahead when temper like that was unleashed.

Mallory went slowly around the house to the porch, head drooping.

"What happened?" Jeff Chandler demanded, appearing in the doorway.

"Ask Norma," Jim replied in a lifeless tone. "It's her business."

"*Is* it ?" Jeff exclaimed. "Oh, you don't have to be afraid to speak. I got it out of Rena, how that damn sneak was going to get her to go up in a plane with him, 'just to see what flying was like'! I told him to keep away from here, then he slys around Normie. I don't blame her so much, though she does need a spanking, drat her spunk!"

"I think she's been punished enough," Jim advised. He went on to tell Chandler what the plot had been. The old man's face went chalk white.

"I'd have killed him!" he burst out.

"No, you wouldn't," Jim said, "on her account."

Chandler shook his head, scowling. "I'm afraid I would, husband or no husband, I'd have been so damned, hell-fired mad!"

"That's what I was," Jim said, managing a sick grin. "And boy, how she hates me now!"

Norma had vanished upstairs. The two men talked long on the front porch. Mallory confided details of the two attempts on his life but made no mention of the suspicions he had entertained concerning the actual identity of the Judsons. Finally he described his experience in the *Leader* building and his discoveries at the Grove ranch.

"Godfrey mighty, Jim, I wouldn't of missed being in on this for anything. And I can keep my lip buttoned, don't you be scairt. Owens knows that. Many's the deal we've shared knowledge of. Now I can tell you something mebbe you don't know. That sneakin' devil of a Phil has had recordin's made of some of his main songs. So's they can put 'em on any time he can't be there to sing in person. And he made 'em promise that they'd always let him pick which ones was to be used. Looks like he was making sure he could get a message through, the sort he wanted, any time."

"Well, we may be guessing wrong," Jim said. "I'm going to let the sheriff worry about that while I do *my* worrying about the ranch."

Norma was at the supper table, as cool as

an icicle. She ignored Jim's presence so completely he nearly doubted his own existence. It was the same at the early morning breakfast.

"We'll be so busy out there," Jim said to Chandler when he was leaving, "that I won't try to come in before day after tomorrow."

"And we'll move out the next day," Jeff returned, beaming.

BUSY hours followed. Jim Mallory had scant time for pondering anything but the work in hand. The bunch of new heifers were delivered and moved to their grazing range. A bunch of saddle stock that had run loose all winter and spring were rounded up and put into the big pasture. There was a long ride to inspect a waterhole that would be very important within a short time, a drift fence to patch without delay. He was in the saddle until he almost tumbled from his horse with weariness, only to be up and at it the next morning. But by Wednesday afternoon, the real rush was at an end. Jim and Bogy cleaned up and set out for Blanchard. Mallory had almost forgotten to speculate on developments, that is, any unnected with Norma Chandler. Regarding her frame of mind he blew hot and cold. One minute he feared to meet her, to face that icy manner, the next he said to himself, "Aw, shucks, forget it. *Make* her thaw and like it!"

There was an undercurrent of excitement in the house. Even Rena went around with flushed cheeks and brighter eyes. She blushed when she met Jim, fluttering more than usual. He pretended not to notice. He guessed, and rightly, that Jeff had told her of Phil Judson's plot. Later he informed Jim that he had also told her what Mallory figured out regarding Blondy's getting out of the barn.

"I took her up in the loft and showed her them shoe prints," Jeff said, "and lined out how the hull business coulda been worked. She didn't like it none, but Rena's gettin' back into natcheral harness again. I guess she won't cut up much."

He added an account of a visit with Sheriff Owens. "He's lookin' for real developments tonight," Jeff declared, his faded eyes brightening with excitement. "And he's traced that gun. It was bought by a feller named Hawk. Over in Arizona. I ain't goin' into details now. Seems like Nate's been workin' on this business for some while, then you pop in an' hook up a lotta missin' links for him. He sure is grateful. Wants you to kinda stand by tonight, if he needs help."

"I sure will," Mallory declared.

He had made up his mind to apologize to Norma, but she gave him no opportunity. He imagined she wasn't quite so cold towards him, but the state of indifference was almost worse. And it was hard to hold his temper when he learned she was playing at the broadcasting station that evening. First for a chorus of children, then for Phil Judson to sing.

"Rena insisted 'twas best," Chandler growled. "Said 'twould save talk, 'cause Normie's always played for him. I said, 'Talk, hell,' but she shushed me. Of course, neither of them women know what you and I do. And Rena won't believe he could possibly have played the trick with Blondy, he's 'too understanding,' she says. He might of tried to trick Normie, because he's in love, but she says we must overlook that. Hunnh!"

Chandler further informed Jim that Norma would play no more for the station, at least not while she was staying on the ranch.

After supper he dropped around to the sheriff's office.

"Things are falling into line," Owens said in the same quiet voice. He might have been speaking of a weather report. "I've caught a little whiff of nervousness, like they might be getting suspicious," he went on, "but I don't think anything will spoil what I hope for tonight. If nothing definite happens, well, I'm going to try to lay a trap, now that I'm reasonably sure of some facts."

He could be enticed into saying no more. And Jim Mallory wandered around by the broadcasting station. He had no intention of going inside while Phil Judson was singing. Ellie came out and spoke to him as he sat smoking on the porch. Norma knew of his presence but he doubted if Phil Judson did.

IT WAS nearly time for his broadcast when a thin, awkward young fellow came hurrying up the street. As he turned in at the station, Mallory remembered seeing him at the *Leader* office the morning he went there to buy a paper. Running up the steps and across the porch, the fellow held out a note to Ellie. "From Mr. Judson," he panted. "He says that Phil *must* read it before he sings. It's terribly important."

Before Jim had digested this speech, the messenger had gone and he heard Phil's voice saying, "Ellie, I've got to change my line-up.

I find I don't feel like singing those songs I planned today. Get Norma out from the control room and tell her."

Jim leaped to his feet and dashed into the reception room.

"No," he said, "you won't change that program."

Phil whirled, his lips snarling back from his teeth when he spied Mallory. "That's my business," he said. Norma came quietly through the glass door. "I'm changing my songs," Phil told her. "I'll do *Anchors Aweigh* and—"

"You'll do what you lined up or you won't sing!" Jim ordered.

"You can't force me to sing!" Phil said venomously.

"That's right, Jim," Norma told him sharply. "Keep out of this, please!"

"Almost time," Ellie reminded them, looking alarmed.

"You don't know how important this may be!" Jim said desperately. "Norma—quick, get the recordings of those songs Judson was to have done. For God's sake, it's terribly important! Quick—get 'em!"

"Don't move!" Judson commanded, springing between her and the cupboard. "He's crazy!" He flung open the door into the control room. "I'll make an announcement," he shouted.

Jim grabbed for the door, drawing it shut. "Norma, get those records. Ellie, call the sheriff, he'll tell you what's up."

At that instant Judson lashed at Jim with his right hand, the weight of his body behind the blow. Mallory sidestepped, letting the fist shoot over his shoulder while he countered with a jab under Phil's chin. "Norma! The records!" His command rang above the slugging of flesh on flesh.

Her eyes, wide and staring, were fixed on Jim's face. She moved to the cupboard.

"Hurry!" he ordered as Judson lunged at him with evident intent to throw him to the ground. Jim sidestepped and landed a right on Phil's jaw, spinning him from his feet. He was up like a cat, diving for Jim. Norma had darted back into the control room bearing the records. Phil shouted at her between the hammer blows of a hard fist on his face. He crowded forward, jabbing at Mallory fiercely. Jim made a feint for Judson's face, sank a terrific right into his belly, then threw himself against Judson. striking his chest with a shoulder. Judson stumbled backwards and crashed down heavily.

"Stop, oh stop!" Ellie was imploring.

But the records were going on. Phil Judson's voice was singing a cheerful song that went out over the air waves. Dave Vance stared scowlingly at Norma, then shot a glance at Jim. He stood over Phil Judson, panting.

"What is it?" Ellie demanded. "How did you dare do that?"

"Because he's a crook and up to serious mischief," Jim declared. "Call the sheriff! Tell him what happened. Judson's got to be kept from giving an alarm."

"Okay, I take over from here," Jeff Chandler unexpectedly announced from the door.

In one hand he held a business-like looking .45. He closed the door firmly. "Don't want anybody buttin' in on this," he told Ellie with impressive gravity. "Jim's right. This bird is a bad 'un. Coming to now. Get up, Judson!" he ordered. "And not a peep outa you."

Jim was already at the telephone. He gave the sheriff a guarded statement.

"Okay, carry on," Owens replied. "Be right there."

Phil Judson was cursing and spluttering.

"That'll do," Jeff ordered. "You listen to them songs of yours. I've had to times enough!"

FOAM flecks appeared on Judson's writhing lips. He glared into the control room, then tried to make a break for it. Chandler brought the gun barrel down on his head and he reeled back.

"Next time I'll shoot," he declared, "and glad to oblige."

When Owens appeared he nodded understandingly as Jim gave details of the recent incidents. "I was afraid they were getting suspicious," he said. "Somebody must have spotted something late this evening that put 'em too much on guard to let that singin' go on as planned. Dunno what they'll think,

mebbe that something went wrong with their message. My car's out back. We'll take him over to the jail and keep him outa circulation till we see what brews."

"You can't hold me, damn you!" Judson shouted.

"Oh, can't I?" the sheriff asked mildly. "Well, I'm a-goin' to try it. And I'll deputize Jeff to see you don't break jail."

He turned to Jim, drawing him out of earshot. "My scout told me that Royal Stacy is heading in this direction up the highway. I've got a deputy out back, and I'm goin' to make you another. The two of you are to go and keep close to that garage. Wait for me."

"What's this all about, sheriff?" David Vance asked, scowling worriedly.

"I'll tell you tomorrow—mebbe," Owens replied. "But thanks for the cooperation. You, too," he added to Norma.

Then they were gone, the sheriff and Jeff to the jail, to enter the building from the side where they would be unnoticed. Jim and the deputy made their way to a shadowy spot where they could watch the rear of the *Leader* building. Mallory saw at once that there was a light in what he judged was the room from which he had descended into the prison cupboard. But there was no sign of life in the basement.

They waited in silence, the sheriff joining them in a few minutes. It was now past eleven o'clock and there was little stir on Main Street. Neither did anybody seem to be moving about inside the newspaper building.

A half-hour dragged by. Then it became evident that a car without lights was creeping along the street from the direction of the railroad. Evidently the driver was doing everything to avoid attention in the town. Arrived near the building, it halted in the darkest blotch of shadow. A long, thin figure detached itself and went slowly around to the front. Owens laid a cautioning hand on Mallory's arm.

Nothing happened for more long minutes, then a second car came sliding from the gloom. And a second man detached himself from the driver's seat, following the example of the first arival.

"Good, two fish," Owens murmured. "They were going to take out a big haul tonight." He handed Jim a gun.

Very shortly the waiting men were aware of sounds inside the garage. The men stiffened and examined their weapons. One leaf of the garage door opened slowly, revealing a widening line of light.

"Go on out there and get on watch, Hawk," Henry Judson's voice ordered. "Zuver, you and Oakley help put this stuff in the cars. It's checked. That's your bunch, Stacy, the last of it. And yours, Wickert."

ONE MAN emerged and struck off into the lots a short distance. The watching men tautened at a signal from Owens and commenced rising slowly from behind their brush screen. Now the garage was revealed through the half-open door. An ordinary-looking rack of shelves across the back had been pulled out and stood almost against a side wall. A large section of the rear wall was opened out, and behind this Jim spied the spot he knew he had occupied in dense darkness. There was the bench and the piles of papers and boxes. He stared uncomprehendingly at the heavy packets being carried out. Some were reddish in color and seemed to be sheets of stamped paper. All of a sudden he knew.

Owens gave the signal and they stepped forward as the two men rejoined Judson and his two companions inside the garage.

"You are all under arrest," the sheriff said clearly.

Judson's arm moved swiftly and the interior was plunged into darkness. This lasted but a split second when a powerful flash revealed every corner, each line of the pallid staring faces. Zuver fired his gun, the bullet tearing between Owens and his regular deputy. The sheriff fired almost simultaneously, knocking the weapon from Zuver's hand.

Royal Stacy stood tall and bent and trembling, his face livid.

"There's enough ration stamps here to flood the entire Western states," the sheriff declared serenely. "You had a good engraver, Judson. That was quite an idea, recruiting your gang from prison acquaintances who had served their terms. But this gives enough on 'em to send you all back. And *you* will face a charge for the murder of Henry Judson whose identity you took when you sent him over a cliff. Had quite a time locating Mrs. Boynton, but we found her last week. And the game's up."

"How about Hawk?" Jim exclaimed.

"My man grabbed him soon after he went off out there," Owens said calmly. "Here they come now. He's been camping on the Grove place, as you thought. Meet the bird

that tried twice to kill you, Jim Mallory. And all because you happened to be takin' that short cut when these birds needed privacy."

"What are you going to do to us?" Stacy demanded.

"Turn you over to Uncle Sam," the sheriff replied. "All except Judson and Hawk."

So much was being explained that Jim felt bewildered.

"I told Jeff who Judson is," Owens said when they were going to the jail. "He's getting a great kick out of that. Says he knew it all the time; there couldn't be two noses like his."

As soon as he was released, Jim Mallory raced around by the broadcasting station. The building was closed and wrapped in darkness. Turning, he went as rapidly in the direction of the Chandler house. There, too, was no glow of light, just a dim beam in the living room. Bogy Kemp sat on the porch.

"Dag nab it!" he burst out. "What happened? Where'd everybody get to?"

When Jim explained, he was speechless for a long minute. Then he expelled his breath in a curse.

"Me, I went to bed early," he finally said disgustedly. "I heard Rena cryin' out and exclaimin', then Norma makin' a fuss. I got up to see what 'twas all about, and Rena wouldn't peep a word. Told me to get back to bed and Jeff would explain in the mornin'. Hunnh! And that was all happenin', almost under my nose."

When Mallory came down to breakfast the next morning, he learned that Norma had saddled Blondy and ridden for the ranch at break of day. He drove the car out some time later, with Rena, the two men and their essential personal baggage. Other trips, when supplies were needed, would bring any added articles.

When they rounded a bend and followed the slight incline in the direction of the ranch buildings, Chandler said, "Just imagine this being a dude outfit."

"Don't you even speak about them Boyntons!" Rena exclaimed. "To think of any human being schemin' like that, for years and years. Then comin' in here like a pair of Satans, foolin' everybody and—"

"Speak for yourself," her father said tartly. Then he added in a soft tone, briming with a feeling that brought moisture to Jim's eyes, "Look there! The old place. Just like it used to look, all them years we lived here. Jim, my boy, you've sure brought back yesterday to me."

"Why, 'tis just the same!" Rena sighed wonderingly.

BLONDY could be seen in the small pasture. On the porch Norma swayed back and forth in a rustic rocker. Jim knew only one thing was lacking to make it Paradise for him.

As he got from the car, Bogy thrust a paper into his hand, whispering, "The telegraph operator give that to me this mornin', when I scooted down town on that errant. I was scairt to give it to 'em, hated to have bad news today. You better break it, easy as you can."

Mallory felt his heart take a nose dive. But he opened the message at once. He paled, then color flooded his cheeks and he lifted his arm high in jubilation.

"Folks!" he shouted. "Billy's coming back!"

"I knowed he would," Chandler said stoutly, extending a hand to the message. "He was just misplaced for a bit and now he's found. And just like I told you, he's getting a long leave."

Jim had to extricate Norma from the group, almost forcibly, some time later. "Come here," he said, drawing her around to the far side of the house under the shade of a cottonwood that had branches conveniently close to the ground. "We've got something to settle, right now."

"Y-yes?" she said, flushing and evading his gaze. "What is it?"

"Whether you accept my sincere apology for being a ruffian," he said softly.

"If you accept mine for being a spoiled kid," she replied, smiling at him with tremulous red lips. And what could an impulsive fellow like Jim Mallory do but kiss them?

He did. And she seemed to like it, so he kissed her again.

"That was lovely!" he exclaimed. "Better than Paradise."

"Um-m-m," she murmured agreement.

Then she said, when he cuddled her close in his arms, "Jim, darling, you brought yesterday back to Gran'dad and Aunt Rena, and tomorrow to me."

"Bless your heart," he whispered. "And don't you know that tomorrow wouldn't be perfect, without a little of yesterday mixed in?"

VELVET-LINED LADY

By S. Omar Barker

VIVIAN tried hard to be Ross's ideal—the kind of girl a man wants to protect—but in the long run he changed his ideal anyway.

ROSS McCAMBER was handsome, six foot high and hell for strong. He also had strong ideas about women. Several ranch gals, dry-lander's daughters and one schoolmarm had more or less tried to shake him loose from them, but wound up by marrying other men that didn't act quite so chivalrous; men that would let them cram into a pair of overalls and help on a cow-work, hoe beans or pitch hay any time they took a notion.

Out here in New Mexico women have always helped with the outside work thataway, not only because it takes more sweat than sweetenin' to make a living, but because they like to. My Ol' Lady always claimed that any wife who couldn't do at least half as much outside work as her husband and do it twice as good, ought to go back where she come from. Personally, I've always held that it's a woman's privilege to dress how she pleases and do as much work as her husband can get out of her.

So this idea of Ross McCamber's that the only gal for him was one that would set ladylike on a silk piller and play with her ruffles, sounded like horse feathers to me. Of course he considered it all right for a lady to do housework. But he was dead set against her wearing pants and riding astride, whether for work or pleasure. Anywheres she went out of doors, he claimed she ought to go in a buckboard, daintily adorned in however many skirts and petticoats the fashion called for in them days. Or at the worst, ride a side saddle.

That was in the days before dude ranches, but due to a temporary weakness in the bank account from having to take cattle instead of cash on a debt the Bug-Tussle Ranch owed him, ol' Ual Perry decided that the UP Connected would take in a summer boarder or two to help pay taxes.

The first one to check in was a Miss Vivian Van Doren, billed "Handle With Care" from Omaha, Nebraska. Maybe she wasn't really billed thataway, but she looked like she ought to have been. I couldn't help thinkin' Ross McCamber sure had missed a bet by not coming to the railroad to meet her himself instead of sending me. For if there ever was a gal that looked like she was born to set on a silk piller and astonish the men, she was it. Like the old ballad says:

Oh, that gal from the East!
Oh, that gal from the East!
Her face was as purty as peaches an' cream!
Her eyes, they was blue as a blue-bonnet's dream!
Her voice was as soft as a cottontail's fuzz!
She looked cute an' dainty, for that's what she wuz!
Oh, that gal from the East!

She wasn't togged out in no overalls nor mutton-leg pants, neither. I found her setting among her luggage in the depot so lady-like and dressed up that I was glad my Ol' Lady had made me wear a clean shirt. I told her to set there a minute while I found a man to help me load her big trunk, but she headed me off.

"Please don't bother," she smiled. "I'll help you!"

Her end of the trunk must have been a heap lighter than mine, the way she gave it the old heave-ho into the buckboard.

"You must have et raw meat for breakfast," said I, wiping the sweat from my honest brow.

"Oh, there's nothing much heavy in that trunk," she laughed, pearly white. "Just my new saddle and a few things."

"Them few things must be sacks of lead," I grunted. "No ladys side saddle ever weighed that much!"

"Oh, it isn't a side saddle!" she smiled.

"Do you consider it immodest for a girl to ride astride, Mr. Hodgins?"

"Young lady," said I, "I'm past the age of considerin' feminine immodesty any of my business. But if you want to make a hit with Ross McCamber, you better not let him see you straddlin' no bronc in no britches."

"Indeed! And who is Ross McCamber?"

"Oh, just a feller," said I. "Excuse me, ma'am, but you'll have to slide over. The right side is for the driver."

But she didn't slide.

"You look so hot and tired, Mr. Hodgins," she said, "I'd just love to drive out for you, so you could lean back and rest."

"I'd just love to rest, too," said I. "But not thataway. These mules ain't no team for no gal-child to learn buckboard drivin' on. First time you let a line sag under one of their tails we'd have us a runaway. Besides, our road runs through the old Bug-Tussle Ranch an' we might run onto Ross McCamber along the way."

Miss Vivian Van Doren sighed, lifted her skirts as dainty as a doll baby and moved over to let me have the driver's seat.

"Have it your way, Pop," she said. "But I don't see what meeting Ross McCamber, whoever he is, has to do with it."

"If you knowed ol' Ross you would. If he caught me lettin' a lady handle the reins on these *machos*, he'd tie a hard knot in my tail an' drag it through the cactus!"

"Don't say things like that!" she protested, sorter looking down her nose. "You still haven't told me who Ross McCamber is, you know."

"Yeah, I know," said I.

She waited quite a spell before she asked me again. "Is he the owner of this Buck-Tassel Ranch you mention?"

"It ain't Buck-Tassel," said I. "It's Bug-Tussle, so called because they run one of these old curlicued Spanish brands that looks like a couple of June bugs wrastling with each other. Only I hear the new owner is figgerin' on changin' their iron to something simpler."

"Is Ross McCamber the new owner?"

"No, ma'am," said I. "He's just ridin' down here today to sorter look the new outfit over for fly specks. That's why I said we might run into him."

That kept her quiet for purt' near two minutes, then she sorter took me by the arm. "Listen, Pop! I still don't know who Ross McCamber is."

"Oh, him!" I shrugged. "I don't see why you should be so interested in a cowpoke you never even met. You didn't, by any chance, come out here lookin' for a cowboy to marry, did you?"

"Not by any chance!"

"You mean you done it a-purpose?"

She kinder laughed, but I could see she was getting a little mad, too. "You evasive old scalawag!" she scolded. "If it weren't for your age I'd twist your whiskers for you!"

"If it wasn't for my age," said I, "I wouldn't be wearin' any. Ross McCamber don't. He's young an' good-lookin' an—"

"I am not in the least interested in Mr. McCamber," she sniffed.

That was a fib if there ever was one, but I shut up anyway. After about a mile joggin' along without talking, I begun to git drowsy. Now as a usual thing, even with that team of mules, I could give the lines a half-hitch around my wrist and steal a little nap. But this time, not really aiming to doze off, I neglected to take the half-hitch, and all of a sudden I woke up right in the middle of a wheel-bustin' runaway.

IT SEEMS I had let the lines slip out so slack that Miss Vivian Van Doren decided she'd better grab 'em. In so doing she had let one of them *machos* clamp his tail down over a line, which was what had started the runaway. Them mules wasn't quitting the road, but they were taking the curves mighty short. All of a sudden one wheel hit a boulder, the buckboard bucked high like a bronco and come down without me.

I picked myself up out of a patch of wild gooseberry thorns just in time to see a fog of dust heading for the narrow pole bridge over a deep arroyo off up the draw. The gal had slowed them mules a little but she sure hadn't got 'em under control. I knew them *machos* would hit the bridge all right, because I never saw a mule yet that wouldn't look after his own safety. But if they hit it at that speed some of them loose bridge poles would fly up and bat that buckboard right off in the arroyo. And not a damn thing I could do about it.

Just then something on a horse whipped past me like a he-bat out of Hades. Instead of following the curve of the road, he cut across the gully-gouged draw. It was rough and risky riding, but it got him there barely in time to quarter in on them runaway mules and git 'em stopped a scant dozen feet from that rickety pole bridge.

By the time I got there, this cowpoke had the mules anchored to a scrub oak, the gal setting on his slicker in the shade of a juniper, and was just climbing up out of the arroyo with his hat brim-full of spring water. He held it to the gal's lips with all the solicitude of a mother gillygaloo bird feeding its young.

"Drink this, ma'am," he urged her anxiously. "It'll help quiet your nerves!"

From the way she batted them blue eyes up at him I surmised her nerves needed quieting all right, but not the way he meant. He must have been a little nervous himself, for when she reached up to help steady the hat, her fingers touched his, accidentally I reckon, and he spilt water all over her dress. Then he like to blushed himself to death apologizing.

DON'T let it fret you, cowboy," said I. "When a feller rescues a female from the jaws of death like you just done, she's got no right to squawk if he spilt a whole bucket of water all over her."

"I'm not squawking!" spoke up the gal, peert as a polished pistol. "I ought to have worn overalls for a trip like this anyway."

"But I'm sure glad you didn't," said the cowboy earnestly.

"Why? Don't you think I'd look nice?"

Probably just the thought of how she would look in a nice snug pair of levis was what made him blush. But he also sorter stiffened up his neck and laid it on the line. "Ladies don't wear men's clothing," he said.

"But maybe I'm *not* a lady!"

"You look like one to me," he said, looking awful solemn about it. "A plumb beautiful one!"

"Oh, thank you, kind sir!" She got up and made him a pretty little bow that proved she certainly was limber at the waist anyhow. "May we have the honor of your company in our carriage?"

"She means how about hitchin' your nag to the tail-gate and overloadin the buckboard for a while," I explained. "Or ain't you goin' our way?"

"I ought to," he said, looking at me kinder hard, "to make sure you don't have another runaway. But I've got a little ridin' to do, up on the mesa."

Something about the non-committal way he said it made me perk up my ears.

"Bug-Tussle Mesa? What's up?"

"Nothin'," he shrugged. "Just got to see a boy about a pup."

So saying he lifted into his saddle, doffed his hat mighty mannerly to Miss Vivian and rode off. It was then I noticed a big long rip across the back of the cantle of his saddle. Miss Vivian noticed it, too.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "What do you suppose made that gash in his saddle?"

"Oh, snagged it in the brush, I reckon," said I.

Whether she knowed it or not, I was lying. That rip was fresh, and it had been made by a bullet. Maybe our new neighbors here on the Bug-Tussle wasn't going to be so easy to git along with after all.

We rode a mile or two without saying anything, then my fair passenger hove a sigh. "So that was Ross McCamber!" she said.

"How did you guess it?" said I. "Kinder of a goof ain't he?"

"Goof my eye!" said Miss Vivian Van Doren of Omaha, Nebraska. "I think he's nice!"

"You won't," said I, "the first time he sees you riding a-straddle on that new saddle you've got in your trunk!"

She smiled kinder dreamy-like. "Maybe he won't see me!" she said.

EVERYBODY had done had their suppers before Ross rode in that evening. I had fetched my Ol' Lady over from the cottage to meet the new summer boarder, and being a nice evening, we were all setting out on the porch, including a couple of cowboys up from the bunkhouse with their necks all washed and clean shirts on. Miss Vivian spoke to them polite and friendly when introduced, but that was all. She had only just barely met Ross McCamber that day, but I could see she was as anxious about him not coming as I was. The rest of them wasn't worried, of course, because I hadn't said anything about that bullet rip in his saddle.

When Ross finally showed up, she let out what sounded to me like a sigh of relief, then let in to laugh and talk with them other two cowboys on the steps as flirtatious as all git-out. Ross McCamber acted like he aimed to walk right on past 'em, but he didn't. He stopped and stood looking down at her.

"I'm mighty glad to see you got home safe, ma'am," he said.

"The same to you, Mr. McCamber," she said gravely. Then she gave a gay little laugh. "It looks like I'm going to have an exciting summer. Mr. Shorty Smith says he'll teach me to rope, and Mr. Bench Hayden thinks I'll make a good lady bronc-rider. What do you think?"

"I think I better go in an' get me some supper," said Ross McCamber.

Ual Perry and I went in with him. "Well, what kind of new neighbors have we got?" the Ol' Man asked him.

Ross took his time about answering. "I never was treated more friendly in my life," he said finally. "A feller called Tub Dunlap seems to be the owner. He brought some cattle and his crew of five with him. One of 'em is a feller I had a little trouble with when I was workin' for the Association up in Colorado. Joe Harris. I helped gather the evidence that jailed him for petty rustling. He didn't seem to recognize me, so I didn't remind him. Like as not he learned his lesson and is goin' straight by now. Anyhow they all treated me mighty neighborly.

"Dunlap said to tell you they'd look out for our strays if we'd look out for theirs. Said he understood the Bug-Tussle cattle had always given some trouble, drifting too free onto UP grass, but if any trouble did come up, he wished we'd come and talk it over and not get our neck hair up too hasty. I promised him we would."

"Umm," grunted the Old Man. "A feller don't generally mention trouble unless he's aimin' to make some. You say they brought some cattle in with 'em? They say how many altogether?"

"Three hundred head, they told me. I went back an' rode around some after they thought I'd come on home. Two hundred and forty-six was all I tallied, but you know what a man can miss in the brush and under those rims around there."

"Sometimes he don't miss very far, either," said I.

Ross knew what I meant all right. He give me a look which I took as a warning to keep my mouth shut. Ual Perry was old and had a bad heart. As his segundo, Ross McCamber made it his business not to tell the Old Man anything to worry him if he could help it—like a bullet rip in a saddle. Which wasn't always easy, because Ual Perry was a man that liked to know what was goin' on.

"They aimin' to put the old Bug-Tussle iron on that new stock, Ross?" he inquired.

"No," said Ross slowly, "they ain't. They've registered a new iron for the ranch. The stuff they brought in is already branded in it. Dunlap told me they aim to burn it on the Bug-Tussle cattle, too, as they gradually git around to it."

"Umm," grunted the Old Man again. "You never happened to notice what that new brand looked like, I suppose?"

ROSS McCAMBER couldn't help grinning at the idea of a cowboy not noticing a brand. "It's Dunlap's nickname: TUB," he said, innocent as a lamb. "TUB Connected."

Ual Perry got a stub pencil out of his pocket and started drawing brands on the tablecloth. Neither of us needed to look to see what he was doing. UP Connected would work over mighty easy into TUB Connected.

"Handy, ain't it?" grunted the Old Man.

"Could be," shrugged Ross. "Maybe we better kinder watch 'em, anyway."

I walked down to the bunkhouse with Ross because I had something I wanted to ask him. About the time we got out of good earshot from the porch there was a swish of skirts and Miss Vivian overtook us.

"Mr. McCamber," she said, sorter breathless, "that *was* a bullet rip in your saddle, wasn't it?"

Even in the dark I could see Ross was surprised. He just stood there, looking at her the best he could in the starlight and keeping his mouth shut.

"Try callin' him Ross," said I, "an' maybe he'll answer. He ain't used to that 'Mister' stuff."

But they both seemed to have been struck dumb, so I horny-toaded on down the path and stopped behind a cottonwood, out of sight but not of hearing.

"Young lady," I heard Ross say, kinder stern-like, "do you realize we haven't even been introduced?"

"Do we need to be?" she said. "My name's Vivian."

"It's a purty name," he said.

"Did somebody shoot at you over on the Bug-Tussle?"

"If they did they missed," said Ross dryly. "There's been cowboys shot at before, I reckon."

"But why?"

"Maybe to warn a feller he's ridin' where he's not wanted. Maybe just for the hell of it."

"But next time maybe they won't miss!"

Ross sorter laughed. "Prob'ly there won't be no next time," he said. Then he turned awful sober again. "I don't aim to be rude, Miss Vivian, but I don't see why a beautiful young lady like you should be so interested in the safety of a man she never even saw before until this afternoon!"

"If I were really a lady, maybe I wouldn't be!"

"I knew you were a sure-'nough lady the minute I laid eyes on you," busted in the cowboy. "An' sweet an true an' honest an' lovely an'—"

The way he broke off sounded more like he run out of wind than purty words. As near as I could make out in the starlight, he suddenly took a grip on both her arms right above the elbow, then leaned down and kissed her. Not one of these grab-hug-and-hold-me-tight pulse-pounders. More like a little boy stealin' a respectful lick at the ice cream spoon in hopes of a dishful later. I couldn't see that she made any move to dodge it nor slap him away, neither. Then he turned and come on down the path and she hurried back towards the house.

That night after we got back to our cottage, I asked my Ol' Lady what she thought of it.

"It don't look reasonable they could sure 'nough fall in love so quick," said I.

"Love don't have to be reasonable," she told me. "Just because it took you a month of Sundays to come to your oats when we was courtin' ain't no sign it can't happen quick to other folks!"

IT LOOKED like she was right. I don't know whether there was any more kissing or not, because I ain't no hand to spy. But if there ever was a he-man hair-pin that set a gal up on a pedestal to love and worship, it was big ol' Ross McCamber. And if there ever was a gal that knowed how to keep him coming it was Miss Vivian Van Doren.

All the female summer boarders I'd ever seen before liked to tog out in boots and overalls to rowdy-dow around ahorseback and play cowboy. But nobody ever seen Miss Vivian in anything but a dress. She'd sit twiddling her thumbs on the porch for hours, just watching for that big lunk of a cowpuncher to ride in, worrying for fear somebody might take another shot at him.

It was a fact that Ross was doing quite a big of snoop riding to make sure our new neighbors weren't using any UP Connected cattle to practice brand burning on, but whenever Vivian tried to ask him about it, he would just pat her hand and tell her such things wasn't for purty ladies to fret about.

Then I happened to ride in one mid-morning and ketch Vivian out in the corral in levis and boots building a loop in a lass rope. I watched her snag it quick and neat over the head of a saddle pony. She led him out the back gate and into the junipers behind the stables. When

I snuck around there, she had her new stock saddle on him and was lacing it up, as business-like as an ol' bull buckaroo from the brush country. She like to jumped out of her skin when I stepped out.

"Howdy, cowgal," I grinned. "I wish ol' Ross could see you in them pants!"

That put her back up right quick. "Why, you darned old snooper!" She looked purt' near to cry. "If you dare say one word to Ross McCamber, I'll—I'll—"

"Shucks, child," I busted in, "I was only hurrawin' you a little. I won't say nothin' to nobody about nothin' you don't want me to. Where was you figgerin' on ridin'?"

"Any place!" she said. "Just to ride!"

"Wouldn't you rather I'd fetch you out a side saddle, so you could ride like a lady?"

"Lady be darned!" she exclaimed. "Gee whiz, Pop, I was raised riding a-stride on a ranch back in Nebraska, before Papa opened his bank in Omaha. One reason I came out here this summer was to get out of living in the city and—and maybe marrying a man that doesn't even know which end of a horse the tail is on! Gee, Pop, I don't want to make Ross mad at me, but I just got so darned tired of sitting around in dresses that I couldn't stand it any longer!"

"It might do Ross good to git mad at you," said I. "Seems to me he's actin' like a goof, anyway."

"Yes, he is!" she sighed. "But he also happens to be the man I've fallen in love with, darn him!"

"Shucks, I'll bet you're just afraid he'll find out you're bow-legged," said I.

All the answer she give to that was to toss her purty head, step aboard the pony and ride off into the junipers.

After that, with my connivin', she snuck out and rode purt' near every day. Maybe it wasn't right for her to fool a lovesick cowboy thataway, but I figgered that part of it wasn't none of my business. Besides Ross was bound to ketch onto her one of these days. Then they'd either blow up or find out that love ain't a matter of what a gal wears nor how she rides.

MEANTIME several of the cows that Ual Perry had received from the Bug-Tussle in payment of a debt just before Tub Dunlap bought the outfit, seemed to have disappeared. Ross had an idea our new neighbors had something to do with it, but he couldn't lay his finger on nothing positive. Them cows had the old Bug-Tussle brand on them, and a fresh UP Connected.

On the other hand, Dunlap owned cattle wearing the old Bug-Tussle iron and a fresh TUB Connected. You can see how easy it would be for them to doctor a few of our brands, and no way in the world to check up on 'em except by a close examination of the fresh brand on every former Bug-Tussle cow on their range. Without purty definite evidence to go on, a man couldn't hardly do that with a neighbor's cattle.

In fact Ross had already run into a little trouble on account of roping a cow on their range to examine the brand, when Joe Harris and another of Tub Dunlap's cowpokes rode up on him. As it turned out, the brand was okay and it was their cow. They didn't get rough about it, but Joe Harris did mention that Ross seemed to be riding their range a hell of a lot lately.

Maybe if Ross hadn't been so fuzzed up with thoughts of love, he would have taken exception to such talk and bored in on 'em. But he didn't.

Instead he rode in early that afternoon—and caught the Lady of His Dreams just hurrying to the house in a saddle-slick pair of overalls after a sweat-and-dusty ride. As quick as she saw she was caught, she stopped to face the music. But there wasn't no music to face. He just tipped his hat politely and rode on past. She headed him off at the gate.

"Please, Ross," she said, "don't be mad with me!"

"I ain't mad," he said, looking mighty sorrowful. "I just hate to find out you've been deceivin' me, that's all."

Maybe it was because she was hot and tired. Anyhow she flared up. "I'm free, white and twenty-one, Ross McCamber!" she high chinned him. "And I'll wear what I please!"

"Sure," he said quietly and went on in the corral.

But that evening she didn't come out on the porch, and Ross stayed down at the bunkhouse.

When they ignored each other the same way two more evenings it sure looked to me like a bustup. Then one evening Ross never showed up at the ranch at all. Vivian had rode off by herself that morning and it begun to look like she wasn't coming in either. I'd begun to figger they had run into each other some place and cut each other's throats—or else run off to git married—when the gal came loping in, sweaty and dusty as a Texas cowhand. Right quick she got me off to myself.

"Pop," she said, "they've arrested Ross for cattle stealing."

"Who?" said I. "When? Where? How many?"

"Dunlap and his men! I watched them from the rim of the mesa. There was a cow and calf in the corral at the old horse camp, and Tub Dunlap and Ross rode up together and went inside afoot and looked at them. They talked a while, then lit cigarettes, and Ross went back to his horse while Dunlap turned the cow and calf into a little pasture. Ross was just starting to get on his horse when three other men stepped out from behind some cottonwoods and pointed their guns at him.

"I was afraid he was going to try to draw, but I guess he saw they had the drop on him, for he put up his hands and they took his gun and rode away with him. I couldn't get down off the mesa in time to head them off, but I saw a Mexican wood-hauler, and he told me they had taken Ross in to the sheriff for branding a Dunlap calf. I rode back to the corral and—"

"It ain't what you done that matters now," I busted in. "It's what I've got to do to git him out of it without giving the Old Man a heart attack!"

"I'm going with you, Pop!" she said.

I TOLD her this wasn't no buckboard excursion for a lady, but she saddled a fresh horse and come along just like she was. We told the Old Man she had a hurry-up telegram to send, so he wouldn't git all fretted up till I found out what was what.

The gal was right. They had ol' Ross in jail, and the sheriff wouldn't let neither of us talk to him private.

"Whatever you got to say, you can spill it at the preliminary hearing before Judge Conroy first thing in the morning," he said. "I sure never figgered McCamber for a brand-burner, but it looks like they got the goods on him this time."

It kinder got my goat that Vivian didn't act no more worried than she did. But I didn't say nothing about it. I got her a room at the hotel, while I went and bunked in the hay at the livery stable.

Judge Conroy didn't waste no formalities on the hearing. Three of Dunlap's men, including Joe Harris, swore they'd caught Ross McCamber burning the UP Connected iron on the calf of a TUB Connected cow.

"You don't have to take our word for it, Judge," insisted Joe Harris. "We bobbed the cow's tail to mark her. Her and the calf are in a little pasture out at the old horse camp. You can come out and see for yourself."

"What *you* got to say for yourself, McCamber?" asked the Judge.

"Mainly that I'm a sucker," shrugged Ross. "Dunlop told me they'd butchered a calf of ours by mistake, so they'd branded one of theirs in our iron to replace it. He said the cow and calf was at the old horse camp, so I went and took a look. I told him I reckoned he meant it neighborly, but maybe I'd better talk to the Old Man about it.

"Then when I went to climb on my pony, these other three coyotes stepped out and throwed down on me. So here I am. You don't have to go look at the calf, Judge. I admit it's fresh branded in the UP Connected iron—only I didn't brand it."

"If that ain't a hell of a story!" sneered Joe Harris. "You're the one that's headin' for the pen this time, McCamber."

"It sure looks thataway, Ross," said the Judge. "On the evidence offered, I'm obliged to bind you over to the grand jury for trial at the next district court. If you can make bond, I'll—"

"But Judge," broke in Miss Vivian, "don't you think you ought to at least go out and examine the evidence yourself?"

"I don't see why, ma'am. Ross admits the calf's misbranded!"

"But maybe he didn't read it right!" She turned on her purtiest smile and batted her eyes at the Judge to beat sixty. "Will you go, Judge, if I hire a livery hack and drive you out there myself?"

Ross looked at her kinder funny. "You better not get mixed up in this, Vivian," he said, kinder stiffly. "You better let Pop Hodgins take you on home."

YOU shut up!" said Judge Conroy. "It ain't every day this court gits invited to ride with a good-lookin' gal, and by the holy donnywiggles, I ain't goin' to miss it! Git your horses, all of you! This here court is goin' out to view the evidence! Sheriff, you fetch the prisoner!"

I expect it galled Ross McCamber considerable to watch the Lady of His Dreams in a pair of old levis, butterin' up to an old widower like Judge Conroy all the way out there, but he never let on like he noticed it.

To make it a short wolf and soon skun, the bobtailed Dunlap cow and her calf was still in the pasture, just like Joe Harris said. But the

brand on the calf wasn't a UP Connected. It was a passably neat TUB Connected, same as the iron on the cow.

"By God, looky here, Judge!" blustered Joe Harris. "There's been a mistake made!"

"And it looks like you connivin' coyotes made it," said Judge Conroy dryly, with a wink at Miss Vivian. "There ain't nothing unlawful in a calf wearin' the same brand as its ma. Therefore, in the absence of evidence to support same, the charge against Ross McCamber is hereby dismissed. Turn him aloose, Sheriff!"

"To hell with 'em, boys!" grunted Tub Dunlap, getting in a hurry to pull out all of a sudden. "Let's leak outa here!"

"Just a minute, Dunlap!" Ross McCamber stepped in front of his horse. "I expect I could have you all jailed for false arrest, but I ain't goin' to. I just want to tell you that the UP Connected has registered a new brand. One that won't be so easy to monkey with. If you want to be honest neighbors with us from now on, it's up to you!"

But neither Dunlap, Joe Harris nor any of them waited to answer. As soon as they were gone, Judge Conroy whacked Ross McCamber on the shoulder and winked.

"You two young'uns don't happen to be in the market for the matrimonial services of a Justice of the Peace, do you?" he inquired.

Ross looked at the gal and she looked at him, then dropped her eyes. She was still dressed in the same levi pants and boots she'd wore the day before, and her shirt had a mighty unlady-like rip in it. But by the light in that ol' cowboy's eyes, you'd have thought she was the perfumed Queen of Sheba setting on a wagonload of silk pillers. You could also see by the way his Adam's apple pumped that he couldn't find no words to say so. Finally he let go and blurted it out:

"Damn it, Vivian, will you marry me?"

"Damn it, yes!" she smiled. "But not in these clothes, Ross! I'll have to go by the ranch and get a dress, and—"

"The trouble with you women," grinned Ross McCamber, "you're always worryin' about what clothes to wear! You sure don't need to no more, honey! You look just right to me the way you are!"

"Hell, she ought to!" said I. "You don't think it was some velvet-lined lady settin' on a silk piller that doctored the brand on that calf when she saw how them Dunlap yahoos was aimin' to frame you, do you?"

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. This plant has small pink flowers, pin-like seed pods, is good sheep forage and its Spanish name is *affilerió*. What is it commonly called?

2. Which of the following Western game animals eats some grass but is not a ruminant —that is, does not chew its cud: elk, deer, antelope, bear, mountain sheep?

3. The hollowed-out fruit of what creeping plant was frequently used by frontier settlers as a water-dipper?

4. If *mesteño* (may-STAYN-yo) means mustang, what is a *mesteñero* (may-stayn-YAY-ro)?

5. Speaking of cowgals, which of the following was Anita Lockhart of Texas: a trail boss, a rodeo trick rider, a lady outlaw, or a Texas Ranger?

6. One of the most visited mountain peaks in the West is Pike's Peak. In what state?

7. Why is Oklahoma called the "Sooner" state?

8. As what are Altar Doane, Bronco Sue, Battle Axe Helen Law, Pearl Hart, and Sister Cummings remembered in the West?

9. What is a stake-pin?

10. What does a cowboy do when he "takes a *pasear*"?

You will find the answers to these questions on page 55. **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total score is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

NO RANSOM

By Dorothy L. Bonar

THERE can be no ransom for a heart that's been captured by love —as Lexie Daniels found out.

SHE was abducted midway between the last two stage stations before Santos. Even as she was being carried through the darkness with a powerful arm about her waist and a hard, warm hand clamped firmly over her mouth, Lexie Daniels could scarcely believe it was actually happening. It seemed more like some monstrous nightmare than reality.

A moment ago she had been pacing slowly back and forth, glad of a chance to stretch her legs while the stage driver, guard, and two male passengers labored to clear the road of boulders deposited in it, apparently by a small landslide. It had been sunset when they first stopped. She had overheard the driver bewail the fact that it would be well past dark before they could hope to be on their way again, and had accepted it philosophically.

To her it had been just one more of the many annoyances and ill omens that had blighted the happy promise of this trip from the very beginning. First there had been the amazed alarm of her friends who could not understand her wish to turn her back upon St. Louis, now that her aunt's death had left her independently rich; who regarded as mad her determination to take herself to a mining town in an untamed territory, and there cast her lot with a father she scarcely knew.

Then there had been the pessimistic warning of the agent at Trinidad, end of the railroad line, as to the rigors and dangers of a long stage journey for a young, unescorted female. When he'd read her name on the passenger list, he'd been even more upset.

"Daniels!" he'd repeated, eyes popping. "Would that make you any kin of Marshal Tom Daniels of Santos?" When Lexie admitted to being a daughter, he'd shaken his head in sfocked concern.

"Then them Apaches I mentioned at first ain't noways your biggest danger, ma'am," he asserted earnestly. "That's wild country down there and overrun with outlaws. And the toughest one of all is Gila Bill Blair. Right now your pa's got him in jail, standin' trial for robbery and murder. There's them that thinks his gang will get even with the marshal if he's hung, which he will be. And if some of them poison mean hombres should get wind that Daniel's gal was on a certain stage. . . ." He shook his head, adding, "Was I you, ma'am, I'd keep mum about my name from here on."

Skeptical, yet unable to down a certain apprehension, Lexie had found herself heeding his advice. She'd held aloof from other passengers. Since none seemed to be traveling so far as she, it had not been hard to lose her identity in the shuffle of changing guards and drivers, with distance and days piling up behind.

Now, less than a hundred miles from Santos, she had just started to feel confident that she would get through all right, when this terror pounced upon her from the rear of the coach. He had stolen there under cover of darkness, of course. Now he was retreating, taking her with him as soundlessly as he had come.

Frantically Lexie tried to twist free of that muffling hand and scream. With all her might she struggled to reach the ground with her feet and make some noise that would attract the attention of the men laboring so short a distance away.

But she was not tall, and her abductor apparently was. For he held her suspended in air easily, while he moved through the night as silently and smoothly as though gifted with a cat's vision.

After what seemed hours Lexie found herself placed upon her feet and the hand removed from her mouth. As she drew a spasmodic breath, the man said in a pleasant voice:

"Yellin' won't do no good, ma'am. We're too far away for them to hear even if they missed you by now, which I doubt. They're too busy."

Understanding burst upon Lexie. "You!" she charged. "You deliberately *rolled* those rocks down into the road!"

"I had to stall the coach until after dark

some way," he replied equably. "I couldn't take you off it at the point of a gun because I don't want them to know for sure what happened to you."

Before Lexie could make sense of this statement, he made her jump with a low whistle. As she endeavored to collect herself again, a tread of hoofs and jingle of bridle chain brought a horse looming close.

"He's plumb gentle, ma'am." Lexie heard the assurance as she was lifted lightly into a saddle. The next moment her captor had swung up behind her and sent the animal into a fast walk. He was taking her—where?

The grim menace of the thought set Lexie to fighting again. The only thing was, he seemed to have expected this. Before she knew quite how it came about, she was held in such a manner as to find it almost impossible to move an inch. She found her head wedged tight under his chin, her own burrowing into a scarf that felt soft and clean. Her nose pressed skin almost as smooth as her own and smelling nicely of shaving soap.

When she stopped trying to struggle, the crushing power of his arm relaxed. He held her firmly, but not uncomfortably.

"You're not going to be hurt," he promised. And for some inexplicable reason she believed it.

Just for a moment, though, of course. It was natural for curiosity to get the upper hand briefly, to cause her to wonder about his identity and appearance. Because the sky was overcast, only the vaguest of outlines could be made out. She could only guess that he was young from the supple resiliency of his body as he'd controlled both her struggles and the horse.

ONCE she asked where they were going and received no answer. Only the growing roughness of the terrain warned her that they were heading back into the hills she had seen from the stage road. It had looked a wild, tractless wilderness from there. Lexie found her heart pounding with a slow, heavy beat when at long last he called a halt, swung her to the ground and led her into some sort of structure.

Later she was to find it a one-roomed shack, crude and uninviting. Now, as he lighted three candles rooted in cold wax upon a table, she had eyes only for her abductor.

She saw that he was tall, well built, and obviously young, all as she had expected. He

had a square chin and a wide mouth not too thin-lipped. But the rest of his features were concealed by a neat half-mask, while he wore his hat pulled down tightly on his head.

"Reckon you're tired, so we'll talk in the morning, ma'am," he said. "The bunk's yours. I'll roll up by the door."

When he picked up a blanket, Lexie protested quickly. "But you've got to tell me what this is all about! What do you want of me anyway?"

Through the slits of his mask his eyes were a cool grey. "You're Tom Daniel's daughter, aren't you?"

Lexie stared. "How did you learn that? No one on that stage knows who I am, and my father doesn't even know I'm coming!"

Without quite understanding why, she explained how her mother had died at her birth, how Tom Daniels had blamed the hardships of frontier life for the tragedy and taken his infant daughter to St. Louis to be reared safely away from them. He had visited her enough for Lexie to have learned to love and pity him in his loneliness. Now that her aunt was dead, she had determined that they should be together. She had come West without letting him know, lest he make some attempt to dissuade her.

"Fine!" applauded the kidnaper. Then, in answer to her obvious bewilderment, he explained, "Our trails crossed in Trinidad, ma'am. I saw your name on the passenger list when I went to buy passage to Santos for myself. With a little maneuverin' I learned from the agent that you were Tom Daniels' girl. So, instead of riding the stage, I struck across country by horse. By travelin' light and fast, I reached this country with time enough to plan out how to get hold of you."

A sudden, grim edge of purpose in his voice, he continued, "It's just this. The marshal happens to have a certain party in jail that I aim to see turned loose. I figure that when he finds out I've got you, we'll be able to make a swap."

"In other words, you intend to hold me hostage for Gila Bill Blair's life!" Only with effort did Lexie keep her voice steady, for she'd gone all shaky inside. Of course she'd known it was something like this. But to hear him brazenly admit it. . . .

"Not exactly." He cut into her sickening thoughts. "I don't aim for you to get hurt no matter how this turns out. I don't fight women, ma'am. Just between you and me, I'm running a big bluff. But I figger that the marshal will be scared to call it. That's why I had to keep everything secret-like, so his hands won't be tied."

Again, to her shake of head, he explained. Only Marshal Daniels was to learn that his daughter was a captive, her ransom price to be Gilla Bill Blair's freedom. In this way he would be free to act without outside interference, able to slip his prisoner out of town to a specified spot and turn him loose.

"That way," he finished, "there'll be no fuss raised until after the exchange is made."

"You're forgetting the men on the stage," pointed out Lexie. "They'll report my disappearance."

"Sure. But they'll do that in Juniper, the nearest town. Santos is too far away to concern itself, even after word does finally reach there. Then, how could an unknown lady passenger be connected with the marshal or Bill Blair? Especially with your dad believing you're in St. Louis."

LEXIE made no reply. He'd made his plans carefully, shrewdly. And even she had worked unwittingly for this success by concealing, too late, her identity.

Tired and overwhelmed with realization of helplessness, Lexie felt vexed tears begin to sting her eyes. Because pride rebelled against permitting him to see them she turned quickly to the bunk, lay down, and pulled up a blanket.

She did not intend to sleep, had not believed she could, knowing herself to be completely at the mercy of a self-confessed desperado. Yet she didn't even know when he blew out the candles. The next moment, it seemed, there was sunlight shining in her face, a delectable fragrance filling her nostrils.

On coals in a fireplace a blackened coffeepot bubbled busily. The masked man straightened with a sizzling skillet in his hand as Lexie hastily sat up.

"Good morning," he said, smiling.

Lexie caught her breath, for one corner of his mouth curled intriguingly higher than the other, while his teeth were white and even. He still wore his hat. But the hair showing beneath it was black, and looked so soft and shiny that she wondered what it would be like to touch it.

Mortification at the trend of her thoughts turned her hastily to the basin into which he had poured water for her to wash. And when

she combed her hair before the bit of mirror he had also provided, it was no help to her poise to find her cheeks pink and her blue eyes bright.

Keeping them lowered, she ate with good appetite. Presently she inquired, "What do we do now?"

"Head for Santos before search parties work out this far," answered her abductor. "I'll saddle the horses while you change into these."

Mechanically Lexie caught the bundle of clothing he tossed her. After he had gone out of the door she examined it, and her cheeks grew hot. There were jeans, shirt, jacket, sombrero and boots, all new, all in boys' sizes. That meant he'd not only picked her name off the stage passenger list. He'd spied upon her without her being the least aware of it, had studied her person so discerningly that he'd been able to guess almost her exact fit in everything.

For a moment her wild impulse was to cast the garments into the fire. But common sense held her back. They would be a lot more comfortable to ride in than a dress. She should be glad he'd been so thoughtful. Besides, there was no use kicking up a fuss unless there was a chance of getting something worthwhile out of it—something like a horse or a gun.

Lexie was dressed when he came back in. She knew from his involuntary stare that her new outfit was vastly becoming, although he said merely, "You'd better push your hair up into your hat, so a body'd have to get close to tell you were a girl."

As Lexie fussed to get her thick mass of hair into place under the hat he said unexpectedly, "You've got the prettiest hair I've ever seen. I thought it was the color of gold, but it isn't. It's more like—like captured sunshine!"

Lexie whipped about. Her heart jumped to find he had come close. "Lexie," he said. "I wish I could tell you something, wish I dared take a chance on your believing me. . . ."

His voice trailed off as their eyes met. Slowly, as though he couldn't help himself, he lowered his head and kissed her on the lips.

THERE was nothing to compel Lexie to stand like a ninny and let him do it. But she did. And a moment later the realization made her furious.

"I thought it would come to this!" she blazed contemptuously. "Since I'm to be Lexie, what do I call you—Romeo?"

To her amazement, a wave of red rolled up his neck and chin to disappear beneath his mask. "I'm sorry," he said gruffly. "It won't happen again. And you can call me Riley."

He was formally polite after that, yet persistently considerate, giving her permission to move about freely while he saddled up. "I'll depend on your good sense to keep you from running away," he said. "It's twenty-five miles to the nearest town or ranch, even if you knew the direction. It's not likely that search parties will work out this far for days, and there is always a chance of running into Apaches. Come in when I whistle."

Lexie enjoyed this unexpected privacy and freedom granted her. She had no intention of making a wild dash to escape, for she knew she would be infinitely worse off, afoot and lost in these mountains. Besides, she was no longer afraid, and that kiss had transformed the situation into a personal duel. She wanted to outwit this high-handed young ruffian now, beat him at his own game.

Resolved to be cool and alert, she obeyed his whistle promptly. And she was both ashamed and alarmed at her glow of pleasure to his hearty, "Good girl!"

What was the matter with her anyway, she wondered wretchedly. What if he was tall, with a wonderful pair of shoulders? What if he had been unexpectedly kind? He was still an outlaw who had kidnaped her for a desperate purpose. Besides, no sane girl could fall in love with a masked man—or could she?

The rigors of the ensuing journey had one merit. They served to squelch completely this disquieting trend of thought. In two days they traveled seventy miles in a straight line for Santos. To Lexie, unused to riding, the torture of those long hours in the saddle served to strip the last shred of romantic glamor from her abductor. She knew he was an unfeeling brute, that she loathed him and would seize the first chance to pay him back in his own coin.

WHEN he produced a paper and stub of pencil, she accepted them with rising excitement. Word for word as he dictated, she set down the explanation of her presence in the country and how she had been abducted. She designated the spot to which the marshal was to take Gila Bill Blair, the

hour, and instructed that he be turned loose, mounted. An hour later she would be sent to join her father.

"I'm making him wait that long so Blair'll be sure to have a headstart," explained the masked man. "The marshal's no fool. There's a chance he'll hide out a friend he can trust, turn you over to him and hit the trail in a few minutes. I want Blair to have a chance."

"But how about *your* escape?" blurted Lexie.

The man shrugged. "I'll hit in a different direction. He'll know the tracks of the horse he gives Blair, and those are the ones he'll follow. . . . Now for something to convince your dad this note ain't a fake. I figured a lady'd be wearing some kind of jewelry. How about this locket, ma'am? Would the marshal know it?"

Involuntarily Lexie moved to stop him as he reached for a slim chain about her neck. But he was too quick. Despite her, he turned the tiny disc and read the engraving on its back. "To Mary with love. Tom."

"It was his first gift to my mother," she confessed unsteadily.

"Then we'll fold the note about it," he declared, and proceeded to do so. "We'll deliver it sometime after midnight."

"We?" questioned Lexie. Her heart missed a beat.

"I can't leave you here tied up," he retorted. "Besides, I've never seen the marshal close, so I'll have to depend on you to make sure that nobody else gets it by mistake. The jail sets convenient-like on the edge of town. I'll wait there while you sneak up and peek through a window. If your dad's in and alone, you'll slide the note under the door and run. If he ain't, we'll hang around until he is. Now you'd better turn in and rest until it's time to start."

Lexie obeyed, her heart pounding in exultation. For, overconfident—perhaps because of her docility thus far—he was on the verge of a mistake at last. Did he actually believe she'd obey him spinelessly once he turned her loose within hearing of town and her father? Didn't he realize the devastating effect just one scream could have upon his plans and position?

To her dismay she learned that he apparently did, and that all her exultings were premature. When they drew rein on a prominence overlooking Santos some time later, she found it a collection of buildings distributed in a sprawling fashion along the edge of a seeming desert. There were many lights. There was noise, too, a sort of roar that attested its wakefulness and seething population.

"Prob'ly ain't over a dozen sober men in town," opined the masked man. "About 4 A. M. they'll start sleeping it off. That's why I told Daniels to slip Blair out of town the hour before dawn, when everything's dead. That'll bring him to the meetin' place about daylight. . . . We'll leave our broncs here, ma'am."

Sore, stiffened muscles made it hard for Lexie to slip to the ground. Then it was disturbing to find that her knees were trembling, while an icy nervousness seemed to have taken possession of her body. Reaction, of course, she told herself quickly. Relief at the realization that she would soon be free, that simply by flinging open a door instead of knocking upon it, she would have turned the tables upon this high-handed desperado who. . . .

The roughness of a rope against her hand put an abrupt check upon her feverish thoughts. Before she could grasp his intent he had slipped a loop over her head and drawn it snug about her waist.

"Just to make sure you mind orders," he said coolly, the remainder of the lariat coiled in his hand. "Try to open that door and I'll yank you flat—and I'll plug anybody that comes out. The same goes if you yell or try to draw anyone's attention. I won't shoot you but I will them—dead center!"

IT WAS almost as though he'd read her mind. Dumbfounded, Lexie stared at him, overwhelmed by the realization that all her plans were blocked. She could risk her own life in an attempt to escape, but she couldn't bring herself to imperil that of another. And it was useless to argue that if he wouldn't shoot her, he wouldn't shoot anyone else. She'd often heard that many of the West's desperadoes were chivalrous towards women, although they would snuff out a man's life without hesitation.

In that moment Lexie knew she had no choice save to continue to obey him. With rescue so close she'd still have to run from it, still have to dash back to this man on winged feet as though it was at his side that she wanted most to be.

Of a sudden her cheeks burned with humiliation and a maddening sense of help-

lessness. "How I hate you!" she ground out passionately.

He did not defend himself. After a moment he said in a tired voice, "That shack ahead is the marshal's jail and office, ma'am. I'll go as far as that giant cactus. From there on it's up to you. And remember what I said!"

Presently Lexie was walking alone, conscious of the slither of the rope as he let it out foot by foot, aware that it would be unnoticeable, trailing along the ground except to someone who came very close. Ahead the uproar of dancehall music and hilarity grew louder. Lexie was glad that she didn't have to venture farther than the edge of the street.

Briefly she shrank against the side of the jail house, fighting for calm. A tug of the rope about her waist sent her edging towards the front of the building. She froze at the corner to the sound of a voice inside, clear and distinct, as though issuing through an opened window.

"I'm not taking any chances," the speaker was asserting. "From now on I want someone on guard every minute in the opposite cell. I don't want anything slipped to Blair through his window."

"Sure thing, Boss," grunted another. Then boot heels clicked, followed by the sound of an inside door opening and closing.

Lexie ventured a peep, discovered a window close to her corner of the building with its lower sash flung up. Through it she saw her father at his desk, a big man with a stern, sad face and greying hair.

GLADNESS and affection warmed her, for she knew he had tried to keep her out of his life only because he loved her dearly. He had given her up because he'd believed it was for her own good, and now he would free a robber and murderer for the same reason. He would sacrifice his honor and self-respect to save her.

As Lexie's eyes misted she knew a wild impulse to go through with her original plan, to shout a warning. But at that moment the rope about her waist tugged promptingly, and she knew she couldn't do it, couldn't set in motion the chain of events which might bring about her father's death; couldn't bare to probe the depths of blackness in her abductor's heart.

With a little prayer she tossed the paper-wrapped locket into the room. Then she was running, frantically, blindly, until the masked man's arms reached out of the night and gathered her in.

It was a chill grey dawn that found Lexie and her abductor in a small circle of rocks high on a hill overlooking a narrow green valley. There was timber on the surrounding slopes and neighboring hills. But the pocket below lay treeless and open.

"You called this place Massacre Valley in the ransom note," she said, breaking a long silence. "How did it get that name?"

The masked man shrugged. "Before the Santos strike was made, a party of prospectors were butchered here by the Apaches. It's been a sort of landmark ever since."

He showed no inclination to pursue the subject, and Lexie did not persist. Yet she couldn't help watching him covertly.

She knew he had slept little last night, for she had awakened twice to see him sitting at the fire, staring moodily into red coals. At breakfast and ever since he had been silent, with a set tightness about his mouth. More than once she had caught him watching her with a strange intensity in his eyes.

Was he sorry now that his plans were about to enter their last phase? Was he reluctant to see her pass out of his life?

Lexie was trying hard not to think such things, trying not to wonder if such questions might not be asked of herself, too, when she saw him suddenly stiffen.

"Here they are," he said in an odd, dull voice.

Heartbeats thundering in her ears, Lexie followed the direction of his pointing finger. At the lower end of the valley had appeared two horsemen. Fascinated, she watched them ride slowly to its exact center and pull up. One dismounted, waved an arm. With alacrity the other wheeled and spurred his horse into the timber. In a short time Lexie could hear the sounds of his approach, the heaving of a horse pressed hard up a sheer slope.

The masked man stood with thumbs hooked in belt when Gila Bill Blair rode into the circle of rocks. Lexie felt a shiver run down her spine, for the outlaw leader was huge and red-headed, with a face inexpressibly evil. She sickened to think that it was for such a creature that the other man had risked so much.

Then her heart leaped, for the outlaw raked his rescuer from head to foot with hard eyes devoid of recognition. He spat out harshly, "You're not one o' my boys! Who are you? What in hell is this?"

"Just say I'm someone squaring an old debt and let it go at that," answered the masked man. He glanced at a rising sun. "In an hour the girl gets turned loose, Blair," he continued. "Reckon that's all the lead I can promise you. I don't think having no authority outside of town will stop the marshal from hitting your trail—pronto!"

HELL, no!" grunted the outlaw. "He told me he'd throw away his badge and run me down again if it took him all his life." Then his pale, slitted eyes moved to Lexie, took her in from head to foot. She shivered, for their gaze was like the touch of a snake. "So you're Daniels' gal, eh?" he observed. "Rockon our friend here—"

"You'd better make tracks, Blair!" cut in the masked man sharply.

The outlaw looked back at him with growing ugliness in his expression. Lexie felt her cheeks drain of color as she sensed the clash of personalities between them, with its threat of worse.

Then the outlaw said slowly, "Mebbe I'd better. You givin' me a gun?"

The other's jaw hardened. "By getting you out of jail and giving you a chance to save yourself, I figger we're quits, Blair," he said evenly. "Reckon you know where to pick up some shootin' irons. My advice is for you to git!"

Inexplicably Lexie froze as the outlaw sat motionless, breath passing audibly between whiskered lips. Somehow she wanted to cry out a warning, though she knew not of what.

And she was still gripped in that icy paralysis when the outlaw shrugged and lifted reins as if about to depart. Unable to move or scream, she saw him yank his horse's head directly to bear upon the masked man, saw him drive spurs deep into the animal's sides.

With a squeal the bay lunged ahead. Less than two feet away, the masked man had no chance to leap clear. His quickness did, however, take him out of the path of the pawing hoofs that would have trampled out his life. Lexie saw the animal's broad chest strike him a glancing blow, saw him flung against a boulder to strike his head and crumple.

In a flash Blair was out of the saddle and had stripped him of gun and cartridge belt. Lexie tried to run as he turned her way, but he clutched her in two strides.

"You're goin' with me!" he said gloatingly. "Ain't another man I hate like I do that damn marshal! Ain't a better way I know to put him in hell than for me to steal his gal!"

Lexie could have screamed then, had not a big, dirty hand clamped itself over her mouth. Abruptly she was reminded of another hand that had muffled her voice so. And she remembered the masked man's words: "I don't aim for you to get hurt no matter how my plan turns out!"

But he was incapable now of making good that promise—unable, perhaps, even to save himself. Twisting in her struggles, Lexie sent an agonized glance in the direction of that still figure crumpled beside a boulder. Instantly every drop of her blood caught fire, for the masked man was trying to sit up, shaking his head dazedly.

It was the outlaw's misfortune that he chose that particular moment in which to reach one hand for the lariat coiled on the other man's saddle. While his left hand and arm formed an iron band Lexie was powerless to break, it could not perform the double duty of gagging as well as holding her. With a wrench her chin was free.

"Riley!" she cried imploringly. "Riley!"

MAYBE it was her first use of the name he had given her. Maybe it was simply the sound of her voice that penetrated the mists enveloping the masked man's brain and goaded him to his feet. At any rate, he got there.

"Blair!" he said. And even across the feet of space separating them, Lexie could see a ring of white forming about his mouth.

The outlaw's response was to swing the girl in front of him, his left arm stretched over her left shoulder and down across her breast. It was the grip best calculated to keep her from writhing aside, even an inch, while his right hand reached for the gun he had stuck into the waistband of his jeans. There was only one thing about it he had overlooked—the closeness of his forearm to Lexie's mouth.

He howled as her teeth sank into flesh, loosened his grip spasmodically. Quick as a flash she pounced upon his other hand, arresting it with the gun but half drawn. He cursed, trying to shake her off. She clung to him doggedly.

Then his fist caught her on the side of the head and sent her plunging through a world of swirling lights. She landed on hands and knees. When her daze started to depart, noises forced themselves into her consciousness . . .

a scuffling sound of booted feet, panting, the sharp impacts of fists on flesh.

She had prevented the outlaw's use of the gun long enough for the masked man to reach him. They were fighting it out now bare-handed, with Blair taking terrific punishment from a younger, faster man. Even as Lexie got to her feet she saw the outlaw fold up before a wicked right hook.

Breathing hard, the masked man picked up his hat and put it back on his head. He took his lariat and tied up Blair securely.

"So your dad won't lose his prisoner after all," he said bitterly. "He'll hang. He threw his life away because he was rotten to the core. But I squared my debt when I gave him a chance to save himself. I had to do it."

RAPIDLY he went on to tell how Bill Blair, not yet turned outlaw, had twenty years ago come upon a small wagon train just after it had beaten off a Comanche attack.

"My mother was the only woman along," explained the masked man. "I was five at the time. My father, James Griffin, was a lawyer hoping to set up practice in the West.

"Well, the Injuns busted up that dream. When they withdrew there were only three men left alive, and all badly wounded. The horses and oxen had been killed, the water kegs sieved. They knew the next attack would wipe them out. Rather than let us be butchered by the Injuns, my mother begged my father to shoot her and me himself. He did as she wanted, but just as he turned to me Blair came along. It turned out it had just been a hunting party of Comanches and they'd been beaten and were not coming back.

"Heartbroken because if he'd waited just a few minutes longer my mother, too, might have been saved, Dad sank rapidly. But before he died, he gave Blair all his money and personal things, and asked him to look after me. It was a big amount—an inheritance—and Blair might have taken it and rode off. But he hadn't gone bad yet. He took me and the money to the nearest town and turned us both over to an elderly couple there.

"Even if it was the only decent thing he'd ever done, I had to give him a chance because of it. And he threw it back in my face because that little bit of good had been stomped out in rottenness long ago!"

Abruptly he put his hands on Lexie's shoulders. "You're free now," he said huskily. "In just a minute you can ride down to your dad. But think over what I've just told you—try to see my side, will you, Lexie? Because some day, when I think there's a chance you've stopped hating me, I'm coming back!"

Briefly his hands tightened their grip. Then he turned, made for his horse.

With a sense of shock Lexie realized that he was leaving, about to ride out of her life maybe for years, maybe forever. And she knew of a sudden that she couldn't let him go. He had told her she was free, but she wasn't. For hearts there was no ransom.

"Riley!" she cried. "Don't go!"

It was the vibrance of her voice that stopped him. Slowly he turned, his gaze unbelieving as she came up to him.

"You mean—" Riley's voice wasn't quite steady—"you mean you don't hate me now?"

"I never did," answered Lexie candidly. "I was just trying to keep from loving you."

It was quite a while before he remembered his mask. "Maybe you'll change your mind when you see the rest of my face," he teased, reaching up to remove it.

But Lexie shook her head. "No matter how you look, you'll suit me," she said staunchly. And she was right.

KNOW YOUR WEST

Answers to the questions on page 47

1. Fillaree. Literally, *alfileria* (ahl-fee-lay-REE-ah) means pin-cushion.

2. Bear

3. Gourd

4. Mustanger. That is, a hunter or catcher of wild horses.

5. A cattle trail boss, one of the first to drive a herd up the Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kans.

6. Colorado

7. When certain lands were opened for settlement in Oklahoma, a day and hour were set at which all land-seekers were to leave a certain point in a race to reach the land they wanted. But a good many homesteaders sneaked in upon their homestead sites "sooner" than the appointed time, hence were called "Sooners."

8. Women outlaws

9. An iron pin driven into the ground to tie a staked horse's rope to, in plains country where trees or bushes are lacking.

10. He takes a trip, whether short or long. Literally the Spanish word *pasear* (pah-say-AHR) means "a walk."

SHE'D LEFT word at home that she was eloping, and with all her heart she wished it were true.

LARAMIE NANCE, helping her grandmother prepare the evening meal in the kitchen of the stage station, kept glancing out the window at the well loaded prairie freighter that had just driven in. This might, she thought with an excited skip of her heart, be her chance to go to Deadfall. She leaned her bright auburn head out of the window, pretending to brush sand from the sill and trying to catch a glimpse of the driver.

Ah, there he was. The pulse fluttered in her throat as she saw by his springy step and lithe movements that he was young. She listened intently for other voices from the freighter. There were none, and the driver spoke only to her grandfather, helping him unhitch the travel-weary team.

Laramie's hazel eyes were as bright as the flames gilding the little panes of the big black range as she turned back to the kitchen. This was the most promising outfit, as far as her plans went, that had come through Ocotillo since she was eighteen over a month ago.

"Land sakes, child," her grandmother exclaimed, "be careful of that hot pan!" She tossed a folded dishtowel toward Laramie. "I never knew you to be wool-gathering before at meal time, Amy. And here come the men for supper."

As Laramie set the pan of smoking corn-

Runaway Redhead

By Thelma Knoles

bread, the baked potatoes and rabbit pie on the table she could hear her grandfather and the stranger splashing at the pump in the yard. Then Gramp announced from the doorway, "This is Mart Kimbrough. He's in a tearing hurry to get to Deadfall, he allows. But a busted axle will lay him up here a good two days, it looks like."

So he was headed for Deadfall! Laramie's heart beat faster under the snug percale bodice and her hazel eyes darkened with purpose. Two days would be long enough, she decided. She glanced directly at the stranger and met a gaze as clear and deep blue as the sky of a hot August sun.

The searching glance seemed to go right through her, to reach past her dimpling smile and read her secret intentions. Laramie flushed and turned away. She went to fetch a pitcher of milk, and when she came back to the table Mart Kimbrough was talking about range conditions in Texas.

Laramie stole quick glances at him. He had the clean, deeply browned look of a man whose life is spent in wind and sun, on mountain and mesa. He was a man a girl could trust. Relief and a frightening sort of expectance pulsed through her. He'd combed his hair out at the pump, and it lay, damp and glistening dark, close to his head. His teeth flashed white in friendly geniality as he talked to the two old folks.

He was just right, thought Laramie. She crumbled the cornbread into golden, buttery

mounds on her plate and tried to swallow the sudden panic that struck through her, as she reviewed her careful, well laid plans. But after all what else could she do? She *had* to go to Deadfall. And her dear, fussy grandparents would never consent, even now that she was eighteen at last. But at eighteen a girl *could* marry. She could run away and marry a man without anyone's consent.

She was glad Gram and Gramp Collins so obviously liked the handsome stranger. It would make it easier for them later.

Now Gramp sighed and pushed back his chair. "You're a cattle rancher, son, and I'm an ex-farmer, but we both got the land and stock in our blood for keeps, I reckon." His old eyes clouded a bit. "Howcome you sold out and are headin' for a gold-crazy bit of hell like Deadfall?"

"This is my second trip there, Mr. Collins," explained Mart. "First time I didn't sell my Texas spread. But I wanted to make a try at gold mining. So when my dad died and my kid sister went to live with an aunt I struck out." He pushed back his chair and eased his long-legged frame into relaxed comfort. "Well, to make it all short I got a fellow in Deadfall to back me on a promising strike. The farther I got into it the better it looked to me. Finally I saw where a thousand dollars put into machinery would turn my prospect into a real bonanza. But my partner couldn't see it that way." He frowned and looked down at the cigarette he was rolling.

"So you traipsed back to Texas and sold your ranch to raise the money?" Gramp surmised, looking disappointed.

"Nope," Mart replied. "I raised it there in Deadfall. My partner agreed to sell out to me, so I borrowed enough to buy him out too, on a short note." He frowned, his heavy dark brows almost meeting and a stern expression settling around his mouth. "I'd have got the machinery installed and everything humming by now, but bad luck hit me. There was an underground explosion and I was set back."

"I don't put no truck in those gold mines." Gram rose and began vigorously gathering up dishes. "They was the cause of our son-in-law, Laramie's father's, death. When you really find gold it means trouble and when you don't it means failure, seems like."

Mart looked at her with a warm smile. "You're right, Mrs. Collins. That's what I decided too. That's why I high-tailed it back

AMY

to Texas and sold my spread for enough to clear that note and develop my mine. Then I'm selling and getting out of it." His voice took on a dreamy tone. "At the foot of those Geronimo Mountains there's a valley that's a cattleman's paradise. I have a good spot picked out to build my home. I'm going to stock it with first-class Herefords and establish the first honest-to-God beef ranch in Arizona Territory." He added with a touch of scorn, "They can keep their gold in Deadfall."

All the time the others were talking Laramie was clearing the table, moving quietly and gracefully, conscious of the swish of her full skirt against the tablecloth. Conscious also, of Mart Kimbrough's eyes straying to her, noting the way the lamplight gilded the auburn curls swirling low on her white neck.

When the dishes were done Laramie went out to the yard where her grandfather and Mart were talking. With her heart beating fast she dropped gracefully onto a log bench. She arranged her skirt like a billowing fan, hiding the little, pointed toes of her slippers. She looked wistfully up at the moon dipping in and out of fleecy clouds and fiercely willed for her grandfather to go in the house.

PRESENTLY the old man stretched and yawned. "Reckon I'll turn in if we're a-goin' to start working on that axle at daylight, young feller," he remarked. He

glanced over at Laramie. "Amy, here, can entertain you. She gets little enough of the company of other young folks."

Laramie's cheeks turned rose. She hoped the hot color wouldn't show in the moonlight. As her grandfather walked away she had a panicky impulse to call him back. She sprang up as though to follow him. Her toe caught in the hem of her skirt, draped so artistically about it. She stumbled and would have fallen, but Mart Kimbrough caught and steadied her.

His hands on her arms were warm and strong, and his deep voice friendly as he asked, "Are you in such a hurry to go in, Amy? It's a right pretty night to stay outside."

"My name's really Laramie," she said, trembling at his touch and angry at herself for her awkwardness. "My mother and father were so anxious to come West that they read John Fremont's book over and over before I was born. They named me Laramie for Fort Laramie, though I was three years old when our wagon train passed it."

He released her arms and now she stood facing him in the moonlight. Her confusion and momentary panic fled and she groped for a way to further her own plans.

"Your grandmother said something about gold mining bringing about your father's death," Mart now reminded her. "How'd that happen?"

"It was at Deadfall, fifteen years ago," Laramie said in a low voice. "I don't know just—just what happened that night. But my father made—thought he made a rich discovery. He—and his friends were celebrating in town and—and—there was shooting and he was killed. My mother took me and left right away." She stopped, her voice choked up.

Mart put his hand on her arm. "It's not an unusual story," he said gently. "Things were wild and rough. Deadfall, as I hear it, was a raw, lawless camp then."

"But my father didn't ever get in such scrapes!" Laramie cried, with the remembered bitterness of her mother's bewildered recollections in her ears. "He didn't drink and gamble like those other men! They—they lied when they said such things. . . ." Her voice trailed off. She bit her lip and stared hard at the bulk of the freighter, looming against the night sky.

She hadn't meant to tell so much. She hadn't meant to give any hint of why she was bound to go to Deadfall. But she would never rest till she knew the truth about the events of that tragic night that wound up in the death of her young father, and the heartbreak from which her mother had died a few years later.

She straightened her shoulders, and managed to look up with a smile. Martin Kimbrough was studying her with concerned, sympathetic eyes.

Laramie ventured, "I always wanted to go back to see if some of my father's friends might not still be around Deadfall, and if they could tell me what *really* happened."

Mart shook his head. "Deadfall is no place for a girl like you, Laramie. I'm afraid you'd learn nothing that would help you and—well, if it was a wild young camp then, it's a full-

MART

fledged center of all that's lawless and wicked and violent now."

As he spoke his eyes became stern and his mouth took on a tight expression. Why, he looked for all the world like Gramp for a moment, Laramie thought, her hopes that he would offer to help her dashed.

She turned away, walked over to the prairie schooner and stared at it, biting her underlip.

Mart followed. He said disgustedly, "It's mighty strange that that axle would break."

"Why?" Laramie asked. "You had a rough, fast trip this far, didn't you?"

"Yes," Mart agreed. His voice was grim. "And if I don't get to Deadfall and pay off that note by Saturday, three days from now, I'll lose my mine. That's why a delay like this is so darn suspicious."

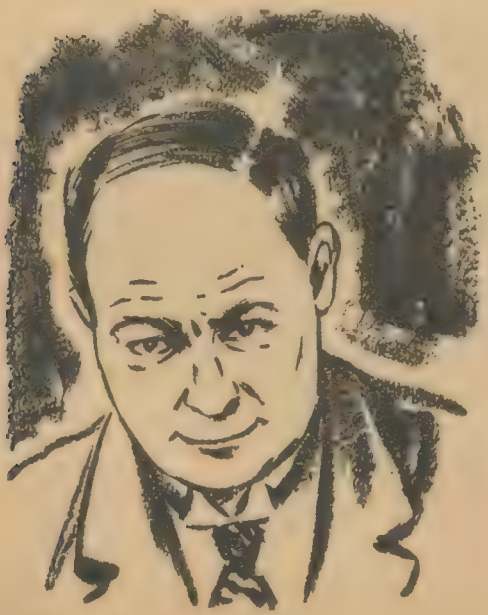
Laramie was still thinking of the mystery of her father's death. "Have you ever heard the name of Julian—Luther Julian—around Deadfall?" she asked.

Mart looked surprised. "Sure. He practically owns the town. Most prominent citizen there, leader of the few representatives of law and order and the decent citizens of Deadfall. Why?"

EXCITEMENT sparkled through Laramie. Why? Because Luther Julian might be the key to the past. For Luther Julian had come West with the young Nances. He'd left his family and planned to send for them after he got settled. It had been he who had helped Bess Nance after the sudden tragedy, who'd put her on the east-bound stage with her baby daughter and promised to look after her affairs.

Only, it seemed Alan's affairs hadn't amounted to much. The rich-looking strike turned out to be only a flash in the pan. But Luther Julian had done all he could.

JUDGE JULIAN



Laramie turned impulsively to Mart. He stood very close to her, and the moonlight made his blue eyes mysteriously dark and bright. He smiled down at her and his smile seemed to draw her closer, closer to warmth and understanding and an answering excitement to that which blazed through her.

He caught his breath at her beauty. The soft light glimmered richly in the auburn curls, showed her parted lips, the creamy curve of cheek and throat. Her eyes were moonlit pools of light. She touched his arm and he reached out and caught her in a light embrace.

"Laramie," he said softly, "you've been looking at me all evening in a way I don't savvy."

She tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat. She tried to draw away, but she could not. She tried to remember why she had wanted to be alone with Mart Kimbrough, but all thought and plan drifted away and left her shaken and breathless with expectancy, with emotion.

Mart bent his head and kissed her. His arms tightened and he kissed her again, his lips taking fire from the sweetness of hers. When he released her she stood as though dazed, then turned and ran to the house.

Outside the door she stopped until she could breathe evenly. She smoothed her curls and laid her hands on her cheeks to cool their burning. But when she stepped into the lamp-lit kitchen she felt that Mart's kiss must be visible on her trembling red lips.

Gram looked up from her knitting. She removed her spectacles, polished them with a corner of her apron, and stared at her granddaughter. Then she said, "Hmmmph," shot a glance at Gramp, and pursed her lips thoughtfully. She didn't look entirely displeased, however, Laramie noticed, and blushed harder than ever.

The next day Mart was friendly, but he seemed to take care not to be alone with Laramie. But of course he and Gramp worked constantly on the broken axle, so Laramie couldn't be sure.

The evening before he was to leave he followed Laramie out into the yard. She felt self-conscious and shy, and stood stiffly staring at the moon poking its golden rim over Coyote Knob.

Mart seemed ill at ease, too. Finally he dropped a half-smoked cigarette and said abruptly, "I reckon this is a pretty lonely life for a young girl."

"I don't find it so," Laramie said.

"All kinds of critters drift through," Mart went on determinedly. "And findin' a pretty girl like you here is like—like—finding a blooming rose out on the desert."

"Thank you," Laramie said uncertainly. The words were complimentary, but he wasn't smiling as he said them.

Mart ground his smouldering cigarette under his heel. "Your grandparents are pretty old," he remarked. "They likely don't realize you're not a little girl any more. Leastwise you have the looks and the ways of a grown woman,

ESTHER

and there are hombres who wouldn't savvy—"

"Savvy what?" Laramie demanded, whirling to face him squarely.

The color burned high in his bronzed cheeks. He looked angry and his mouth was drawn in that tight line as on the evening he'd spoken of Deadfall. He reached out and caught her shoulders in a tight grip, gave her an impatient little shake.

"What I'm getting at, Laramie," he said gruffly, "is be careful who you sit out in the moonlight with. Who you toss your smiles at. In a country like this a pretty girl is enough to set any man loco."

LARAMIE stared up at him. A wave of color washed up from her throat, stinging her very eyelids. She jerked away from his hands and said furiously, "Excuse me for tempting you, Mr. Martin Kimbrough. I d-don't take you too seriously. If that's what you mean."

"But some no-good jasper might take *you* seriously," he said savagely. "That's what I'm getting at."

Laramie spun about, her ruffled skirts swishing around her slippers. With her head high and her slender shoulders stiff she marched to the house. So, he was afraid she'd take his kiss seriously, and he was apologizing. Well, it was a good thing she hadn't given it another thought. And it made what she had to do all the easier, since everything was on such a nice impersonal basis between the two of them.

At the doorstep she stopped to brush a tear away. Then she went in, her eyes dangerously bright and her face flushed. Mart came in behind her.

"Reckon," he declared, "I'll be biddin' you folks good-by. I'll be up and gone before daylight."

"Let's hear from you when you get your ranch going," Gramp said.

"You'll have to come to my house-warmin'," Mart said heartily. "And likely I'll be making a couple more trips in the freighter to get all the furnishings I'll need."

"You figurin' on putting a bride in that new home, are ye, son?" Gram asked archly.

Mart laughed. But he looked embarrassed and self-conscious. Laramie noted that, and she laid the fierce pain that stopped her heartbeat for a second to hurt pride that she'd let him kiss her, and he evidently promised to someone else. No wonder he was trying to get out of it gracefully.

When dawn broke the eastern sky the freight wagon was lumbering along at a good clip, the horses full of spirits after their two-day rest. Laramie parted the canvas flaps at the back of the wagon and watched the sky swiftly brighten. Staring along the back trail, she blinked a mist of tears away. Ocotillo was completely out of sight, hidden behind a spur of the Montijo range.

Laramie let the canvas fall together and settled herself more comfortably in the little nest she had made between boxes and blanket rolls. She was dressed in boy's buckskin trousers and jacket. Around her slender waist was a holster carrying her father's old pistol, which she had learned to shoot years earlier. Beside her was a small bag packed with a change of clothing.

At the bottom of the bag was the letter Laramie's mother had written to Gram Collins on the day of the tragedy fifteen years ago. Bess Nance had written to her mother with a heart full of hope. Alan had just come in from the hills, exhibiting bits of rock with glittering threads of color which he was sure was gold. They were rich, he said. Now Bess's parents could come immediately to join them in Deadfall, and Luther Julian would send for his family, too. Alan, Bess said, had gone even now to find Luther and tell him of their good fortune. She described the spot at the end of a tiny arroyo high in the hills where Alan had made his strike. It was guarded by two blooming yuccas.

"I think I'll suggest," wrote Bess, "that we call the new mine Yucca Bell after those gorgeous cactus blossoms."

Poor Bess Nance! The strike had played out even before the cream-colored bells withered on their stalks. And by that time Bess and her baby were in Ocotillo with her parents.

Laramie thought of all these things for the thousandth time, as she tried to make herself comfortable in the jouncing wagon. She'd coaxed the letter from her grandmother, and she knew every word by heart. The letter had gone clear East to come back to the Collins at Ocotillo. For Bess's father and mother hadn't waited for the young folks to send for them. They'd impulsively followed and had reached Ocotillo when the eastbound stage bearing the widowed Bess and Laramie stopped there.

After the tragedy none of them wanted to return to Deadfall. But the farm back East had been sold. Gram and Gramp Collins had fallen in love with the West. And in spite of her unhappiness the high, dry air and bright sunshine were good for Bess, who had never been strong. They remained at Ocotillo, less than a hundred miles east of Deadfall, buying the stage-station from the gold-struck owner and settling down.

NOW LARAMIE touched the locket swung on a slender chain around her neck and tucked inside the buckskin jacket. The locket contained pictures of her father and mother, and Laramie made them a silent vow now that she would once and for all find out to her satisfaction what had happened to her father in Deadfall fifteen years earlier. Then she'd let the past alone.

She looked out again in time to see the sun rise over the mountains. Gram would be getting up now. Pretty soon, when Laramie didn't come into the kitchen, Gram would go to her room and find the note on the dresser. She'd be surprised and hurt, and Laramie winced, thinking of that hurt. Then she and Gramp would talk it over and decide that young ones were likely to go running off that way. Gram would remember Laramie's flushed face and tremulous mouth and the way her hands had smoothed her rumpled curls when she'd come into the house that first moonlight night of Mart's short stay.

Gramp would opine that he'd never have thought a steady young fellow like Mart would sneak off with their granddaughter, but, land sakes, there was something about an elopement that appealed to youngsters. Good thing she got such a likely young fellow. And they'd begin to think of Mart's promised house-warming.

At that point Laramie couldn't choke back her heartbroken sobs any longer. It was a good thing the wagon made such a noise or Mart up front surely would have heard her. She buried her face deep in her arms and cried harder. She cried till she felt quite sick. And then she wasn't sure whether it was mostly guilt and shame, or having missed her breakfast. For she'd never thought to tuck sandwiches into her pockets as Mart must have done. He never stopped the wagon till the sun rode high overhead, and Laramie thought she'd die if she went another mile without a drink of water.

The schooner came to a stop in a grove of tall cottonwood trees, edging the bank of a shallow river. Laramie climbed down from the back of the tall wagon, and leaned weakly against the tailboard. Up front Mart was speaking to the horses as he unharnessed them and led them toward the river's edge. A refreshing breeze rustled the canopy of leaves and lifted the curls from Laramie's hot neck.

She took a deep breath and moved around the side of the wagon. Mart turned away from the river. He saw Laramie standing there, waiting for him, the sun and leaf-shadows moving lights on her bare head. He stopped, and then came on.

Laramie braced herself, leaving the support of the wagon wheel. She moistened her dry lips and tried to say something light and easy, while Martin came on till he stood directly in front of her.

"I—I came with you," she finally managed to declare.

His shocked eyes, burning blue in the brownness of his face, traveled over her, standing slim and looking far from boyish in the trousers and shirt, with her hair tumbling about her shoulders and her eyes wide and pleading in her white, tear-stained face.

"I'll be double-damned," he said dryly.

"You can't send me back," Laramie pointed out, gaining courage. "And I won't bother you. But I have to get to Deadfall."

"Your grandfather," he stated, looking relieved, "will be catching up with you pronto. Those horses he has can travel plenty fast."

Laramie shook her head. "They won't try to catch us," she said. "They—they think we—"

She couldn't say it, not under that biting, burning blue stare. Her color rose and she dropped her glance to the ground.

Mart caught her shoulder in a hard brown hand and gave her a shake. "What do they think?" he demanded.

Laramie gasped for breath. She looked up to meet the cold fire of his anger and her own defiance kindled. "They think we eloped," she said in a rush. "I left them a note. I'm eighteen now. And they liked you right from the start, and so—so—"

"So everything's just dandy," Mart finished shortly. He turned away from her. He said, glaring at the big dusty wagon, "For two bits Mex I'd let the mine go and take you back right now."

"No!" Laramie cried. "You couldn't do that! You said you *had* to get to Deadfall by Saturday."

He whirled around to look at her again, a long, measuring glance that had nothing of sympathy or friendliness in it. Laramie, staring deep into his snapping blue eyes, was stricken with hurt and surprise.

SHE'D known that he would disapprove of the temporary deceit of her grandparents. She'd even been prepared for his taking advantage of her dependence on him, remembering how swiftly he'd seized and kissed her that first evening at Ocotillo. She'd thought of that, and thought that one could hardly blame him in such a case, and so she'd worn her father's trusty old Colt. But that he'd look at her with contempt and utter dislike shocked her to the toes of her sturdy little boots.

She said now, in a low, husky voice that wasn't far from sobs, "I won't bother you. The minute we land in Deadfall I'll be off your hands. Believe me, this was—was the only way I could think of getting there. And I've been planning on going there for years. You see, if I had a brother that's what he'd do, go back to clear my father's name. It's just up to me."

Mart's face didn't soften. He said, in a hard, gritty voice: "So that was the meaning of those shy, inviting glances you sent my way that first evening. That was back of your pretty pose on that log, gazing up at the moon, and all but wishing out loud for old Gramp to go in." He laughed shortly. "And I laid it to a lonely, company-starved kid."

"You—you didn't kiss me like I was any kid," Laramie said in a choked voice. Tears spilled over her cheeks. "I hate you. I wish I'd waited and picked on someone else."

"So do I, lady," Mart said promptly.

At that she turned her back on him. She leaned against the wheel of the freighter and rubbed furiously at her face with her bandanna. She was tired and frightened and very, very hungry. The vague hopes and dreams she'd built up on this trip, since meeting Mart, collapsed and left a bitter taste in her mouth.

After a while Mart called her to the campfire where coffee was sending out an irresistible fragrance. Pride made her hesitate. She longed to refuse haughtily. She thought with yearning how lovely it would be to turn away, to go on till she fainted with weakness. Then, looking down at her sunken cheeks and shadowed eyes, Mart Kimbrough would repent of his cruelty. He'd bitterly repent and show a belated tenderness.

She ventured a glance at him. He was squatting on his heels, sipping the steaming coffee and picking up a thick sandwich. Hastily Laramie headed for the campfire. If she didn't hurry he'd surely eat all the sandwiches himself. As he ate he stared moodily into the embers.

When they were ready to start out Laramie looked questioningly at Mart, but he didn't suggest that she sit on the high front seat with him. She climbed over the tailboard and into the back of the wagon, thinking angrily that it would be hot as blazes out there anyhow, and she might as well take a nap inside.

She worked a thick quilt out of a roll and

made herself a pallet, took off her boots and stretched out with her head pillowed on her arms. What did she care what that stiff-necked, contrary Texan did or said. She'd gained her objective. She was on her way to Deadfall and no one could stop her. She was excited. She was thrilled. She was so happy that she sobbed herself into a light doze.

The sudden halt of the wagon brought her upright, blinking her eyes and listening to a strange voice. She cautiously lifted the edge of the canvas and peered out. A lone rider had met them on the trail, was talking to Mart.

"Glad to see you, Dusty," Mart was saying, winding the reins around the whipstock and rolling a smoke. "Heading for Ocotillo?"

Laramie's heart thumped. So he thought he'd get rid of her, did he? Or send word to her folks to come after her. Over my dead body, she resolved fiercely.

The stranger was replying. "No, Mart. I'm cutting across the mountains for Coyote Springs in another couple of miles."

Laramie relaxed.

"Hey, Mart," Dusty said now, "reckon that gal in Deadfall's been watching the road for this old schooner for a good week past. She's getting pretty anxious."

"Had a little trouble on the way," Mart replied, "but I'll get there by Saturday all right."

DUSTY laughed. "Reckon you'd better. You can't keep the best-looking gal in the country waitin' around indefinite. When you going to marry Esther and get it over with anyhow?"

Laramie's breath sucked in and her heart slowed to a dragging, painful pounding that went all through her.

"Well," Mart replied deliberately, "if it'll put you and those other lobos at ease, Dusty, we're aimin' to get married soon as I get the mine sold and my ranch house built down in the valley." He paused to draw on his cigarette, to blow out a series of little rings that floated past Laramie like tiny ghosts of her own dreams. "And there's a—couple of more things—to get off my hands first," he added. "When I marry it's going to be right, with everything laid out pretty for a lifetime. Savvy?"

Dusty seemed satisfied and went his way. Laramie sank back on the quilt. She savvied all right. No wonder Mart was worried and furious at the prospect of arriving in Deadfall with a girl passenger. No wonder he didn't relish the thought of her pitiful little fake elopement.

But it wasn't a sense of guilt that racked Laramie with a distress too great for crying, that spread through her like a greedy licking flame and made her wonder about that girl waiting in Deadfall. That made her remember that wild, sweet kiss in the moonlight and the way she'd hardly slept all night for keeping the taste of it on her lips and the feel of Mart's arms around her.

Toward dusk Laramie was beginning to wonder if Mart meant to travel all night. She

Laramie saw a lovely girl dressed

was hungry again, and thirsty, and desperately lonely. She was about to make her way to the front of the wagon and shout to Mart, to remind him that she was along, when the big freighter lumbered around a sharp curve in the trail.

Through the clattering and creaking and pound of the horses' hooves came the crash of a shot. Then Mart was shouting and pulling on the reins, trying to control the plunging, snorting horses. A rider rushed by Laramie's side of the wagon and another shot, followed by an oath, ripped by.

Laramie had the Colt out, had lifted the canvas and was waiting, finger on trigger, when the rider wheeled and dashed back, his gun raised and pointing toward Mart. Laramie took aim and shot. The man swerved his mount into the thick chaparral lining the road.

"Hell, he's carrying a guard!" came a muffled shout from the other side of the wagon. "Vamouse!"

Mart's gun blasted from the front. There was a second wild crashing of brush, and the sound of swiftly retreating hoofbeats.

The huge clattering wagon came to a halt half across the road; Laramie sprang down

in cool blue muslin. Then Esther saw Laramie and stopped short.

and stood braced against the back of the freighter, with her gun raised. Mart ran around to her.

"I reckon," she remarked, her voice throbbing with excitement, "*that* pair of road agents are burning the wind plenty."

Then she looked up at Mart, saw the pallor in his face and the way his hands shook as he jammed his pistol into the holster. Suddenly she was frightened. Her teeth chattered and her knees shook and she would have fallen to the dusty road if he hadn't caught her.

He said nothing, just held her steady till the spasm of fears passed. Then he remarked quietly, but with his hands closing tight on her arms, "Looks like you picked the wrong hombre to ride with, Laramie. Someone's dead set on keeping me away from Deadfall."

She wanted to say that she wasn't afraid, but the words wouldn't come.

Mart's arm dropped around her. For a long, breathless moment he held her tight up against his chest. She could feel the pound of his heart under her cheek. Could feel the rocky, hard strength of his lean body, rigid and trembling against hers.

Abruptly he swung her around toward the front of the schooner. He helped her onto the high front seat.

"We'd better be findin' a likely place to camp."

Sitting beside him, while the dusk closed down and the stars cut the sky with glimmering points, Laramie wasn't tired any more, or hungry or thirsty. She felt light-headed and reckless and out of the world, drifting through the evening, conscious of Mart so close—warm, silent and withdrawn, but close. And she felt a sharp pain at the thought of the journey ending.

IT ENDED on Saturday afternoon, with the wagon climbing a long straight grade to top a mesa in the foothills of the Geronimos and then drop into the little hollow that was Deadfall. As they poised above the straggling little city, Laramie's curious, excited gaze swept over it. Yes, it looked like all they said.

Fifteen years had changed a raw little camp into a mining town—adobe buildings and frame shacks and sheet-iron shanties, a few good houses fenced in and sheltered by cottonwoods and blooming oleanders. Crooked dusty streets were lined with false-fronted saloons and gambling halls, all drowsing in the mid-afternoon heat.

They creaked and clattered to a stop at a livery stable at the edge of town. Mart got down and went around and into the wide doors of the seemingly deserted building. Laramie had her bag with her on the seat. Now she tucked her auburn curls into the crown of the wide-brimmed sombrero she wore, took her bag and swung lightly to the ground. She hurried past the far side of the freighter and down the street.

She'd almost reached the corner when swift, purposeful steps sounded behind her. She hurried faster, the bag bumping her leg and her breath coming fast.

Mart's angry voice spoke in her ears as his hand bit into her arm, "Where the hell are you going?"

"I told you," she protested, "that I wouldn't bother you the instant after we hit Deadfall! Now let me go."

Instead he turned her back toward the livery stable. She had to run to keep up with his long strides. "You think for a minute I'd leave you alone in a place like this?" he demanded.

"But—" It was useless to try to talk while he jerked her along so fast. Her sombrero tipped sideways, and a cascade of curls spilled out, catching the bright sunshine like a hatful of new pennies.

They reached the livery stable and went inside, stepping into the shadowy gloom that

was sweet with the fragrance of hay, rich with the pungence of axle grease and oil, of leather and horseflesh.

"Now look here," Mart Kimbrough declared angrily, "you wished yourself onto me and I'm responsible for you till you get back to your grandparents. I aim to find someone headin' back that way, or else the stage, and put you on it. Till then you stay right here."

He gave her a shake for emphasis and her hat dropped off. She shook back her curls and glared up at him. She longed to kick him in the shins with her booted toes. She considered it, and her glance slid to the bag which he'd taken from her.

But at that moment a silvery voice cut be-

tween them. "Mart, darling!" The voice came from behind his back which shut off all view of Laramie. "They told me your freighter was sighted coming up the grade and I hurried here to meet you. Oh, Mart, it's been so dreadfully long!"

"Esther!" Mart dropped Laramie's arm and spun about.

Laramie saw a lovely blonde girl, dressed in cool blue muslin, closing a ruffled parasol as she came into the stable. Then Esther saw Laramie and stopped short. Her startled gaze traveled over Laramie's dusty boyish clothes, the tousled curls, the bag which Mart had just dropped.

"Oh!" Esther cried, and she laid one hand over her heart. She swayed like a bluebell buffeted by a rough wind.

Mart was instantly at her side. "Esther, wait a minute now. Easy before you start jumping to conclusions. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Laramie swallowed hard. She said bravely, "It's not Mart's fault I came with him."

Though she was hurt to the soul she wouldn't show that hurt to this other girl who called Mart darling and had the first claim on him. She hid her pain under a blaze of anger, directed at Mart.

"He's so mule-stubborn," she cried, "that he wouldn't *let* me come with him on any account. And Gramp is as bad. So I hid in the wagon until it was too late, and—"

"Oh, I understand, now." Esther's frozen shock melted. She gave a relieved laugh. "You did mention a tomboyish sister once, but I'd forgotten. What a trial for you, Mart darling."

SISTER? Laramie opened her lips to protest. Then she glanced at Mart who gazed at Esther as though he'd lost his last shred of reason. Laramie's heart contracted till she could feel the hurt of it like a steady throbbing ache.

"She's not—" he began, speaking thickly and looking acutely miserable. "She's not—"

"Oh, shut up, Mart," Laramie cried sharply. "You've called me worse than a trial, many times." Some of the hurt she suffered edged its way into her voice in spite of her. "Having a *sister* needn't spoil your fun too much! Not if you quit acting like a fussy old—old watchdog and realize that I'm full grown and able to take care of myself." She appealed to Esther. "All in the world I wanted was to ride to Deadfall with him, and then he'd be free of me."

"Don't talk nonsense," Esther cut her short. She gathered herself together and forced a smile to her lips. "Forgive me, but the surprise of seeing you has quite taken my breath away." She hesitated. "I can't recall your sister's name, Mart."

"Amy," Laramie said quickly.

She looked at Mart who was squinting thoughtfully at a line of sunlight that fell across his boot. Evidently he was going to let her pass as his sister. Laramie felt disappointed and relieved at the same time.

"Naturally your sister will stay with me, Mart," Esther was saying, her tone sweetened considerably and her blue eyes resting on his sober face, "until you can arrange to send her back home." A wry smile tugged at Mart's lips, and Esther added more warmly, "Now that I'm over the shock of it I'll *enjoy* getting acquainted with dear little Amy."

Like hell you will, thought Amy rudely. Something about this yellow-haired beauty set her teeth on edge. She was too sweet now, too sticky sweet. And too possessive with Mart, hardly able to keep her white hands off him.

Imps of mischief danced into Laramie's hazel eyes. "Oh, I wouldn't put you to that trouble, Esther. I'm sure I can room wherever Mart stays when he's in town." And she tried her hand at one of the sweet smiles Esther dispensed like a queen tossing flowers to an adoring crowd.

Mart looked alarmed. He said quickly, "Afraid not, Amy. I just use a cot in the back of the stable here. Jed's an old friend and he keeps it for me."

"You see, Amy dear," Esther cooed, "you're just bound to be my guest." Her blue gaze measured Laramie's trim waist, her height in the sturdy boots. "I can even lend you a frock to wear."

"Thanks," Amy refused, "but I have one here." She indicated the bag.

"Mees Esther," came a plaintive voice, and a little Mexican girl in a white apron and a cap that perched atop her brown pigtails, came into the stable. "Your papa Meester Julian, say deener waits and you bring *Señor* Mart along with you pronto."

"Oh, the Judge is home?" Mart asked. "I want to see him too."

Judge? Julian? Laramie's eyes flew from Esther to Mart. Her breath quickened and she

dropped her excited glance to the bag which Mart had picked up again. The refusal that had been on her lips was still as she followed Esther Julian and Mart out of the stable.

What luck, she thought, trying not to notice the way Esther hung onto Mart's arm. She wouldn't object to being a house guest in Judge Julian's house. For surely he must be Luther Julian, the friend who'd accompanied her father and mother to Deadfall fifteen years ago. At the right opportunity she'd learn the truth about that long-ago tragedy. Perhaps she could even manage it without anyone's suspecting that she wasn't really Mart Kimbrough's runaway, tomboyish sister.

The Judge's home was the largest adobe in town, gleaming with whitewash, and with the bushiest, pinkest oleanders leaning over the picket fence. Esther immediately whisked Laramie to a prim little bedroom to change and freshen up for dinner. As she dressed in her own sprigged dimity frock and dainty slippers, Laramie recalled that Mart had said Luther Julian was the most prominent citizen in Deadfall, representing the scanty better element.

When she went into the dining room with Esther her heart was pumping so hard that she felt the gold locket rise and fall on her breast and wondered if they would notice. But the Judge gave her a swift glance through thick spectacles which dangled a black ribbon impressively down to his shirt front, mumbled something, and turned his attention to Mart.

Judge Julian was in the early forties, Laramie decided, sinking weakly into her chair. He was turning bald, and he was quite fat, with his face shining rosily. The questions she longed to ask pushed through her like a rising tide, and she had to clasp her hands tightly in her lap and bite her lips to keep still. Time enough, she cautioned herself, to find out about her father and mother without rushing into it.

PRESENTLY the Judge turned to her and asked what she thought of Deadfall. His keen glance went from her to Mart, obviously seeking a family resemblance as he spoke. Laramie found she would have made a good actress.

She smiled at the Judge, and said gayly, "No, we don't look a bit alike. But that's not surprising, because I'm the image of mother's side and Mart certainly doesn't take after them in any way."

Mart laughed awkwardly, but he didn't seem amused. Laramie saw that it worried him to be taking part in any degree of deceit. He shot her a half-angry glance, and she thought with a sensation of misery that he was regretting again that she'd thrust herself on him.

She turned to smile dazzlingly at the Judge. "I think Deadfall is simply too exciting! Do tell me some of the blood-thirsty happenings of the early days, Judge. Were you here when the camp was first established?"

"Indeed I was, young lady." He beamed around him proudly. "This was the first adobe house of any size to be built in Deadfall."

"Just imagine," breathed Laramie. "Did—did you find a gold mine right away?"

"Almost," boasted the Judge. "Hadn't been here three weeks before I struck pay dirt up in the hills."

"Tell me about it," begged Laramie, all eyes and breathless attention. "What did you name your mine?"

"Trail's End," the Judge replied, sipping his coffee. "It lies at the head of a little arroyo high up in the hills."

The water glass shook in Laramie's hand. She drank and then asked, "Is it pretty around your mine? Wild flowers and trees and grass?"

The Judge laughed indulgently. "You'd be sadly disappointed in the scenery, child. There's nothing but rocks and bear grass, and a couple of spindly looking yuccas that bloom once in a coon's age."

Laramie looked down at her plate. "Oh," she said in a small voice.

"Now, see, you've spoiled her pretty pictures," Esther said teasingly. Then as though they'd wasted enough time already on Mart's troublesome sister, she leaned close to him and asked about his trip.

Laramie was glad of the respite, for the plate seemed to be spinning about under her eyes, and her hands, clutching the napkin in her lap, were cold and shaking. As clearly as though written on the snowy tablecloth that hung over the edge of the table she could see the faded words her mother had written to Gram Collins fifteen years ago.

"I think I'll suggest," Bess had written, "that we name the new mine Yucca Bell after those gorgeous cactus blooms."

Were those vague doubts, those half-formed suspicions that had drawn Laramie back to Deadfall after all these years, based on a

firm foundation? Her brain reeled dizzily and she felt faint as she glimpsed where this trail was leading her—to the possibility that the wealthy productive Trail's End mine owned by Judge Julian was almost named the Yucca Bell by his partner's wife, so long ago.

"Amy," Mart's voice cut through her concentration, "don't you feel well?"

She looked up at him, her eyes great and dark in the pallor of her face. He rose from the table and came around to her. "I reckon," he said, and his voice seemed to come from far away, "the trip was too hard on her. Poor little kid."

Laramie blinked and smiled up at him. Suddenly he seemed very near, his concerned blue eyes looking down at her, his hand warm on hers.

"Mart—" she began.

Esther pushed between them. "Come, Amy," she said, "I'll help you to your room, so you can rest."

IN THE cool little bedroom Laramie lay across the bed and thought things out. She was glad that Judge Julian didn't know who she really was, that he thought her Mart's sister. Because she'd need to work secretly to verify her suspicions.

After a while she heard Mart leave, and then Esther tiptoed past her room. And amazingly, so tired she was, so emotionally exhausted and bone-weary from the long trip, she fell asleep.

The sound of voices in the hall outside wakened her. She sat up to see that twilight was darkening the room. Then she listened to Mart speaking on the other side of the door: "Well, if she's still asleep I won't bother her for a while."

Esther said something in a low, laughing voice.

Mart replied, "Yes, there's a family heading east early in the morning. They can take Amy with them as far as Ocotillo."

"And she can wait for the stage there, of course," Esther agreed, sounding pleased. She added brightly, "Though I'll be disappointed at having our visit cut so short. It's *so* nice to have her here!"

Laramie silently swung her feet over the edge of the bed. Her lips curled into a mocking smile at Esther's false cordiality.

"I aim to see her off with those folks in the morning," Mart declared firmly. "I've got to go up to the mine tomorrow and be gone for almost a week, and I want her on the way home before I leave."

"Darling," Esther suggested, "let's not stand here in the hall. Father's out and we can be really alone for a while. Let's go in the parlor where we can be comfortable."

They moved away. Laramie sat irresolute for a moment. Then she got up. She did not intend to be around when Mart came for her in the morning, bound on sending her back to Ocotillo. Meantime while the Judge was out and Mart and Esther busy in the parlor—Laramie flinched away from the picture that

evoked—she would slip into Luther Julian's study and see if she could learn anything about his private affairs, his affairs of some fifteen years ago.

She dropped lightly out of the window and went around the house. The front door was open and she walked silently down the hall's carpeted length. A line of lamplight and low, murmuring voices indicated the parlor. She went past with a wrench of her heart, and cautiously opened the door across the hall.

The Judge was a cautious man, she soon discovered. His desk and the heavy iron safe in the corner were locked. Well, it had been only a forlorn hope anyhow. She was still convinced that she was on the right track, that something would turn up to prove that her father had been plied with drink and ambushed, perhaps, so that his mining claim could be stolen and his bewildered widow rushed away.

She hadn't been in the study very long when she heard Mart leave, and a moment later the slam of Esther's door. The slam sounded angry and frustrated, and that pleased Laramie. The window of the study was open and low. Laramie lifted her skirts and lightly stepped through it.

Slowly she strolled around the house. The night was soft and dark, full of whisperings and rustlings that made her yearn for someone close and warm beside her. The longing took shape and form as she thought of Mart, and she knew desolately that she'd always be lonely for him. She'd always walk with him in her heart, speaking to her from the whispering shadows, brushing her cheek with his lips as the summer breeze flitted by.

She stopped under the blooming oleander and let its fragrance seep through her, drowning her senses with sweetness. Then she heard the swift crunch of footsteps on the graveled walk in front of the house. The door banged open and the Judge's voice, called Esther, sounding impatient.

Laramie moved along in the shadows till she could see her own window. But as she started toward it the door inside her room opened and Esther's voice came clearly.

"I'll call her, Father."

Lamplight flooded the room. The door swung wide. Then Esther said in surprise, "She isn't here!"

"Not there!" The Judge pushed his way into the room, stared around. He mopped his face with a handkerchief though the evening was pleasantly cool. Then he said, sounding relieved, "There's her bag. She probably just stepped out."

"But what on earth do you want to see that little chit for?" Esther asked. "Why, Father, you're pale. Are you ill?"

The Judge didn't reply. He picked up Laramie's bag and set it on the bed. He opened it and groped around inside. In a moment he held Gram Collins' letter from Bess in his hand. With shaking fingers he held it to the lamplight, read it.

THEN he ripped out a furious oath. His face was suffused with fiery color.

"I knew it!" he whispered hoarsely. "I knew that girl reminded me of someone and as I was walking downtown I remembered. Looks like her mother for fair. She's the spittin' image of Bess Nance fifteen years ago."

He dropped down on the bed, shaking and muttering.

Esther asked sharply, "Nance? Wasn't that the name of the people you came West with before you sent for Mother and me?"

Her father nodded.

"Then what does this mean?" Esther demanded. Her face turned sharp. "Traveling with Mart Kimbrough, passing herself off as his sister. The deceiving, bold little hussy!"

Judge Julian brushed that aside. "That doesn't matter. What does matter is that girl's coming here, snooping around about the mine, after all these years. Someone's put her up to it."

His hands clenched on the bedpost, straining till the knuckles whitened. "Mart Kimbrough is back of it," he declared. "He found that girl and brought her here. Somehow he got wise to my plan to get full control of that mine of his. One of those men I hired to trail him from Texas must have got caught in a corner and talked." He was breathing hard now and the perspiration poured down his face.

Watching from the darkness, Laramie was so tense that her muscles ached, and her breath was a searing pain in her lungs.

"Weren't you backing Mart?" Esther demanded. "Didn't he buy you out?"

"For a thousand, yes." Her father snarled. "A paltry thousand which I let him mortgage the mine for. I mean to stop him from paying back that note and take it up myself."

"But I'm going to marry Mart!" Esther cried. "Would you ruin him?"

Her father looked at her. "When you had him roped for good I'd have cleared things up, put him in charge of the mine anyhow," he replied: "Mart had some fool idea of selling out and starting a ranch. We couldn't have that."

"No," Esther agreed. "No ranch for me."

There was a heavy silence in the room, through which the Judge's labored breathing came. He struck the dresser with his balled fist.

"I'll not have it!" he fumed. "Alan Nance's daughter can't come back and make trouble about the mine. Not after all these years." He shot his head around at Esther. "Where is she?"

"I think," Esther said slowly, and with a viciousness in her voice that sent shivers through Laramie, "that she may be meeting Mart right now. He was in a great hurry to leave. They're probably down at the livery stable."

The Judge got to his feet. "That's on the far edge of town. Dark as pitch. Rickety old barn of a place. I always said it would go up in smoke some day and it'd be a mercy to the town if it did."

Esther said nothing. Father and daughter faced each other in the lamplight.

The Judge added slowly, "It's a choice between a couple of shots from the dark and then a fire that'd leave nothing to tell, and the ruin of everything I've built up." He looked heavily around him. "It's our whole life here in Deadfall—or those two, Esther."

His daughter looked down at her silken dress, at the rings on her fingers, at her love-

ly white hands. She shuddered. Then she said coldly, "As they sow, let them reap. If Mart's there in the livery stable with only that lying, brazen little hussy, then he's not fit to live! If he was what he claimed to be he'd be right here with me now, where he belonged!"

Laramie drew a long shuddering sigh in the darkness. As though released from a spell she poised herself for flight. Mart was in desperate danger.

SHE TURNED, ready to step from the dense shadow of the oleander, and came up against something hard and solid. The scream that rose to her lips was stopped instantly by a man's hard palm across her mouth.

"Keep still," Mart's urgent whisper was in her ear.

She quit struggling and he loosened his hold.

"I was waiting for you to come back to your room," he explained, his lips still at her ear. "I saw and heard everything same as you. Now I'm going to get the sheriff and we'll lie in wait for the Judge to show up down at the livery stable."

"I'm coming too," Laramie said.

He shook his head. "Stay here. Don't go in that house."

He was gone in the darkness. Laramie waited for a few minutes. Then she climbed in the window of her darkened room. She laid her buckskin out on the bed and started to unfasten her dress when she heard Esther speaking to the little Mexican maid.

"Help me pack, Clara. I am going away in the morning."

"Mees has sudden news?" the girl asked curiously.

"Don't ask questions," Esther's voice had the sharpness of hysteria. "I am not well. I am extremely nervous. I think I must go to the Coast for my health."

There was rising panic in Esther's voice. She was lighting out, running away from everything, getting out while she could.

Laramie quickly changed to her boy's clothes. She strapped on the pistol and skinned out of the window. She lost her way several times in the darkness, and sobbed at the loss of time. Finally, almost there, she met Mart returning.

"What—what happened?" she gasped. "Did he get away?"

"No, the sheriff is taking him in now," Mart replied. He caught her shoulders in his rough grasp. "I told you to stay back there." He swung her around so that the light of the waning moon showed her pale face. "Don't you *ever* do what I tell you?"

"Did you think I would?" she retorted. Then she gasped impatiently, "Tell me."

"Simple," said Mart, with deceiving quiet, but his eyes were glinting and his mouth set tightly. "Julian sneaked up to the window in the back of the livery stable and took aim at the two gunny-sack dummies we'd rigged up there in the shadows. He fired into them. Then we relieved him of his guns easy. He had a can of kerosene all ready to start the stable burning."

Laramie shuddered and went limp under his hands. He gave her a shake. "Well," he said shortly, "now you're satisfied with your trip to Deadfall, aren't you?"

She nodded. "I know that Luther Julian stole my father's mine—and so he must have been responsible for his killing."

"And," Mart said gravely, "I found out that he was back of my troubles, too."

He looked gravely down at her. She gathered her courage and said tremulously, "I'm sorry about—Esther." She told him about Esther's plans for leaving.

"Let her go," Mart said indifferently. Anger fired his eyes, roughened his voice. "Since you got what you wanted, I reckon you're through with me?"

"Sure," Laramie said defiantly. "I hate you. I always have." A tear splashed down her cheek but she ignored it.

"Then, *adios,*" said Mart abruptly. He swung her roughly into his arms and kissed her. Then he kissed her again. "Stubborn little mule," he murmured. After a while he suggested, "How about that elopement? Reckon we'd better make it legal, hadn't we? The sky pilot lives close by. I've been thinking of that ever since that first night in Ocotillo. Only I had to get things cleared up here."

"Cleared up?" Laramie murmured. She pushed him away to study his face. "Is that why you left so soon this evening and Esther slammed her door?"

He nodded and drew her close again.

Laramie's eyes were misty in the faint moonlight. "I like elopments," she confessed.

"Honeymoons are better," said Mart kissing her.

How many of these do you own?

If you look under your car, you'll probably find a couple of gadgets something like this one.

They're shock absorbers.

They take the sting out of sudden bumps and jolts. They make a rough road smoother.

And if you're wise, somewhere in your desk, or bureau drawer, or safe deposit box, you have a lot *more* shock absorbers. Paper ones. War Bonds.

If, in the days to come, bad luck strikes at you through illness, accident, or loss of job, your War Bonds can soften the blow.

If there are some financial rough spots in the road ahead, your War Bonds can help smooth them out for you.

Buy all the War Bonds you can. Hang on to them. Because it's such good sense, and because there's a bitter, bloody, deadly war still on.

BUY ALL THE BONDS YOU CAN...
KEEP ALL THE BONDS YOU BUY

RANCH ROMANCES

This is an official U. S. Treasury advertisement—prepared under auspices of Treasury Department and War Advertising Council

COWPUNCHER'S PRINCESS

By Art Lawson

***TO THE** crowds she was Princess Pearl of the Sandwich Isles, but to the cowboy she was just a sweet girl who needed rescuing.*

TO PEARL GROGAN tooling the big Conestoga wagon up this shallow valley in Dakota Territory, the town ahead looked exactly like all the other towns they had left behind. Its freshly rutted street was marked out by green stakes, while a half-dozen canvas-roofed sod shanties and a similar number of tents huddled beside it. One of these was a big double-peaked army tent with one huge word painted on its side: "Whiskey." Another very tattered and somewhat smaller tent also bore its sign: "Repent."

And beyond it forty or fifty wagons had been pulled up alongside the trail. Some had arrived yesterday and some today. There would be more tomorrow and after a while the railroad would catch up to the towns laid out ahead of it and the Grogan wagon would move on again. Pearl smiled grimly. She pulled her four-horse hitch to a halt beside a crudely painted sign.

"Okay, Pa," she said over a shoulder. "We are welcome to Long Bow City, the fastest-growing little city in the West. Stop here and make your fortune."

She was reading the sign. Inside the wagon a man groaned throatily. Behind the dashboard the girl stood up to stretch and to shrug the stiffness from her shoulders. She closed her eyes so she would not have to stare at that dismal little town ahead, and she ignored the quick beat of a trotting horse coming up the trail behind them. Red little specks danced behind her shut lids.

The horse stopped beside the wagon, piquing the girl's curiosity. Opening her dark eyes

quickly she glanced sidewise to find herself looking right into the smiling eyes of a man. Sudden fright swept her. Frantically she motioned him to go away. Laughing, he tipped his wide-brimmed Mexican sombrero and bowed in the saddle to her.

"Evenin', Miss Pearl," he said. "This is a surprise."

Pearl was not only afraid for the man but she was annoyed with him. This could not possibly have been a surprise to him. There was hardly a square inch of canvas on the big top of the wagon that did not announce its business and occupants. On the sides in bright paint were declarations that Princess Pearl's Indian Nerve Tonic and Indian Blood Tonic, if taken according to directions, would cure any ill known to man or woman. They were even good for your horse, Professor Grogan would confide on occasion, and he would challenge anyone present to come up and prove him wrong. He never had any takers.

Now Pearl heard her father moving around in the wagon. She motioned again at the cowboy. When he remained there sitting his saddle she whispered tensely to him.

"You've got to go. The professor—"

"Oh," the cowboy said cheerily. "Is the professor within?"

The professor, himself, answered that for him. He stuck his head out the front opening, scowling fiercely. He was very good at this, or at looking benign or very wise, because once he had been an actor, before a slight mistake during a poker game had caused him to hit the road in a hurry. And his wide grey mustache and van Dyke beard helped greatly with all these expressions. On this particular occasion he reinforced his scowl with a shotgun.

"I thought I recognized the voice," he said.

"Pleased to meet up with you again, Professor," the cowboy said cheerfully. "Hadn't thought my business would bring me here, but—well, here I am."

"Your business—" the professor said ominously—"is going to take you right on away from here. I'm not in the market for beef on the hoof or in any other condition." He made a menacing movement with the shotgun. "And the Princess is not in the market for any fiddlefooted cowboy hooligan from Texas."

The cowboy grinned at the Princess. Just now she looked like any tired girl of eighteen or nineteen; that is, like any very pretty tired girl. She was dressed in a long homespun skirt of a neutral color that did nothing for her dark beauty. She was dusty and hot and worn out from the long jolting trip across the high prairie. But the fear that had moved her was tinged with a growing anger now and the first sign of rebellion.

The shotgun hammer clicked and the cowboy laughed. He dipped his hat very deep. "Evenin', Princess Pearl," he said.

He rattled his big Chihuahua spurs, and the fine horse he rode trotted nimbly on into the shacky settlement called Long Bow City, the fastest-growing little city in the West.

The professor very grandly drove the wagon into Long Bow City. Before he reached the first shack a couple of men were climbing up onto the high seat shouting at him, frightening the four big horses. These men, bearded and dirty, dressed in glazed buckskins and not entirely sober, claimed to be real-estate agents.

"Got the best lot in town, mister," one of the men said. "Bargain. Prac'ly givin' it to you."

"Beat it, Weiner," the other said. "I got here first."

"Now, gentlemen," the professor said in his very grandest manner, "you see here merely a wayfarer in the ways of the Lord, a passenger in the vineyards, a practitioner of the medical sciences who will be here today and gone tomorrow. We have in the Indian Nerve Tonic a balm unsurpassed in all the universe, a secret known only to Princess Pearl of the far-away Sandwich Islands, a boon to all mankind. If you wake up in the morning feeling nervous—"

The professor had brought a bottle from a case behind him. The Nerve Tonic was in green glass. The Blood Tonic was in ruby. Both were beautiful.

The red one caught Weiner's eye. "How much, Doc?"

"Only a dollar," the professor said. "A thin silver dollar that a less wise person would squander on liquor or cards will buy this bottle of the world-renowned blood tonic. The springtime of youth will flow hotly in the blood. The vapors of the season's—"

"Okay, Doc," Weiner said.

Weiner bought a bottle, and so did his rival, and the two men drifted back into the city of hovels to spread the news that Professor Grogan was no good as a real-estate prospect. They drank their bottles of Blood Tonic whose recipe was known only to Princess

Pearl of the Sandwich Islands, and drunker than they were before they had tested it, they went back down the road to waylay the next likely victim.

PROFESSOR GROGAN tooled his big wagon into an empty lot next to the big tent on which was painted the sign, "Repent." The professor hired a small Pawnee boy to look after the horses. He set up the staging on which he would give his show whenever and as often as a crowd gathered. He erected a canvas backdrop which he had painted, himself, in what he believed to be the decor of the Sandwich Islands. There were palm trees with a couple of coconuts. There were broad green leaves, and in one corner was some coral beach with white and blue waves curling on it. Right in the middle of this drop was a black hole representing the doorway to a thatched hut.

The professor set up a small Mason and Hamlin organ and began playing hymns. He preferred temperance hymns to all others and had a way of playing these so that the audience would soon be stamping their feet, so their tongues would be hanging out and their desire for tonic would be great. One of the professor's favorites was *The Drunkard's Hell!*

Twas a dark and starless night,
I dreamed I saw an awful sight,
I thought I saw a gulf below
Where all the dying drunkards go.

Around them stood a weeping crowd
With faces pale and voices loud,
They gnashed their teeth and cried and groaned:
"This is the whiskey seller's home."

The professor had a fine baritone voice. He also had a knack with the organ. In addition he had a fine sign set up above his phony jungle.

At 7 p.m. Princess Pearl of the Sandwich Islands will dance The Famous Hula-Hula (Pronounced "Who-lah-who-lah")

He had cards for other hours of the day that he could substitute for the one displayed at the present. But he never varied his program. He kept Princess Pearl out of sight once they reached a town until the time for her performance. He would play hymns and sing!

Dark in the night the storm rages wild;
God pity Bessie, the drunkard's lone child.

Then as the crowd grew he would bring out a couple of huge iron pots, two kegs, and sundry small boxes and jars. He would produce green and red bottles. He would do a few magic tricks such as turning a pitcher of water into a pitcher of wine. Then when the crowd was ready he would begin to beat on a small tom-tom with his fingers. He would beat a savage rhythm, stopping dramatically just as the princess stepped through the dark opening to her painted shanty in the jungle.

The was the moment when the professor knew he could sell all the tonic he could manufacture. In that second of silence the crowd held its breath. The crowd had never seen anything so exotic as this pearl from glamorous Hawaii. She wore a heavy necklace of flowers that the professor called a lei, cloth flowers that were a little battered from much use but that was never noticed. She wore a skirt that was made of grass and around her ankles and around her wrists were bracelets of great glass pearls. In her black hair was a huge white flower.

The tom-tom would begin to beat softly again and the grass skirt would swirl around graceful legs, and the crowd would stare rapt at this incredible sight. The men had seen plenty of short-skirted honkytonk girls in their day, but never anything like this. They could hardly breathe as they stared. And the women—the honkytonk girls, themselves, in their street clothes—would whisper to each other behind their hands: "She's a fake."

"She can't dance worth beans."

"I'll bet that color'd all wash off."

"She's only a Comanche squaw."

BUT none of them really believed it, and when Princess Pearl began mixing the magic tonics while still dancing and swishing that grass skirt, they all stared in fascinated rapture. Into one of the iron pots the princess would sift a handful of herbs from a colorful box. Into the other she would pour a dark liquid from a queer-looking bottle. She would stir these things, and dance, and then ladle rum from one of the kegs and water from the other, and she would spill some rum so everyone there could smell the heady fumes, but she would not spill the water. Then she would stir it, and in one last wild flurry of the tom-tom she would whirl out that grass skirt so it stood almost straight from her slender waist and duck back into her painted jungle love nest.

The crowd would go wild. But Pearl Grogan, the Princess of the Sandwich Islands, would not do an encore. Long ago the professor had figured this out to a fine point. The people would rather see her dance than buy his wares. If he let her come back once he would have to let her come back a second time and he would never peddle his tonic.

So she crouched tonight as she had so often before up in the front of the wagon where she could keep out of sight but could watch the sky through the wide bows above the great seat. Up there, though she was as far away as possible from the professor, she could hear his clear voice going over that endless speech.

"It's better, lady, when aged a little. But I'll fill your bottle from the brew the princess just mixed. One moment please."

"Yessir, we want the genuine thing," some woman piped up. "How do we know what you got in them bottles?"

"Why, madam, a practitioner of medicine must maintain certain ethical standards—"

And the silver dollars began to clink as the professor sold the genuine article from the pots she had mixed, and the girl began to cry. Tears streaked the color she had spread over her face. She was sobbing bitterly.

"Pearl?" a voice whispered near her.

She bit her knuckles to stop her tears. The man whispered again.

"Pearl?"

He was just outside the wagon, whispering through the canvas.

"Go away," she said.

"I'll be back—tonight," he said. "I'll take you to Texas."

She refused to answer him.

Pearl waited until it was quite dark. Then she threw a long wrapper over her shoulders, put on a deep sunbonnet, and went for a walk. She went straight away from the dirty little town up the north branch of Long Bow Creek. She walked until she found a place where the wild plum made a tight little thicket close to the water's edge. She disrobed quickly, slid into the cool water and set to work scrubbing off the paint of Princess Pearl. She scrubbed every inch. She took a brief swim, then came back to shampoo her long black hair.

She climbed out finally to sit on the bank while the warm night wind dried her, fluffing her silky dark curls that she had been obliged to braid up tightly for her act. For a moment she felt real again under the stars. The creek was real—and the plum brush with its thorns and hard little fruit—and the stars—and the coyote howling away out yonder sounding dismal as if he knew that the railroad that was building would soon upset his whole way of life.

That cowboy was real, too, she thought, the realest thing she had ever known. It made her all warm and nice inside to think of him.

They'd been at the end of the rails when she first met him—at a mad and wild town called Hays City. He had come up with a herd of cattle to ship east or to sell to the construction crews. She had met him again at the next stop west where he claimed to be looking for business. And when the professor had been chased out of there by a gambler he had defrauded, the cowboy had followed.

She knew now what his business had been after he got rid of his herd. She decided she would go with him.

Her heart was light when she stood up, and she ran all the way back to the wagon. Her hair streamed out behind her while the night breeze was sweet and lovely against the skin of her face. She wished that cowboy was here with her, running away with her.

A DIM light burned in the wagon when Pearl got there and a man whom she had never seen before blocked her from climbing up the front wheel into the Conestoga. He had a rifle ready and a mean look to his craggy face that showed he would gladly use his weapon.

"My orders, lady, is to keep every one away," he said.

"But it's my wagon," Pearl insisted. Then that fear that was always with her came to the fore again. "The professor hasn't—"

"Oh, it's the princess?" Her father's voice came from behind the canvas tilt. "Let her in, Matt."

"It ain't the princess," the guard said doggedly. "This dame's white."

"Ah, a customer," the professor said. "Send her around back. Maybe—"

Exasperated, Pearl pushed the guard aside and climbed in over the front wheel. He did not know quite how to fight a determined girl, so he let her go. Inside she blinked her eyes against the light and stared at a very slick-looking man who seemed vaguely familiar and a very blonde woman she was sure she had not ever met. They were sitting on a triangle of packing cases with the professor. The professor held a whiskey bottle in his left hand

and a glass in his right as if he was about to pour a drink. All three people stared at the girl.

The woman spoke first with a note of scorn in her voice. "She faded," was all that she said.

The man squinted at Pearl with keen grey eyes that searched out the girl's hand holding the robe closed at her breast. Her father was visibly annoyed.

"Why'd you take a bath?" he asked. "We have a show at ten o'clock."

"I'm not in it," Pearl said. "I've abdicated. You'll have to get yourself another Princess of the Sandwich Islands. Maybe Blondie will take the job." She stared straight at the woman. "She'd be a riot all right, doing the hula hula."

"Maymie is the name," the woman said. "I knew you were a fraud right from the first. Princess Pearl?" She laughed harshly, and she added: "And by the way you danced this evening you might better have eaten that grass skirt than worn it."

Pearl blushed quickly at the inference. She had not started this, and was not very good at it. The man began to laugh as if he enjoyed it. There was something very cold about him as if he might be a bunch of figures in a ledger showing a loss.

"You two are going to be good friends," he said. His grey eyes flickered to Pearl's white ankle and bare foot that showed under the long robe. They moved quickly to the professor. "Maybe you better let the princess in on—"

"Why, sure," the professor said. He poured a round of drinks, excluding Pearl. He kept on talking as he poured, as if he were making a speech to the mob rather than carrying on a private conversation. "The princess doesn't indulge. She drinks only pineapple juice imported at great expense from her native islands —and her famous tonics, of course. It's a bottle a day of our famous Indian Nerve Tonic and a bottle at evening of our famous Indian Blood Tonic that keeps her in such glorious, radiant, buoyant, glowing health. And I might add, Maymie, the Royal blood of the Sandwich Islands is as white as us but the local hoi-poloi would hardly believe the princess to be genuine without a bit of color. Hence the dye. Now, gentlemen, ladies—to the princess—to success."

The two men and the blonde woman drank their drinks in one gulp each. Maymie made a sour face. The professor smacked his lips. The stranger took a deep slow breath.

"We are consolidating," the professor finally told Pearl. "This gentleman here is Link Dixon." Link nodded to the girl, but she only stared coldly at him. She remembered him now. He had been run out of one of the settlements back yonder by a Vigilante committee that was after the professor, too. She remembered now that he was a tinhorn gambler of sorts. The professor went on with his lecture. "Mr. Dixon operates a—uh—shall we say a palace of entertainment in this lovely village. Some enemy unfortunately painted the word 'Whiskey' on his tent and he has been unable to remove it. He—uh—"

"I suppose I'm going to dance there?" Pearl said. "For a consideration?"

"Something like that," the professor said. His eyes glowed. "I might add this is the greatest opportunity of our life."

PEARL thought she knew all about it. She would dance for a week, a month maybe in this man's saloon. She would have to fight him off and combat the jealousy of Maymie. In the end her father would cheat somebody at poker and would be shot or driven from town. It was the same old thing all over again—another frontier settlement—another stand beside the dusty road away out yonder some place—running away until they came to the Pacific Ocean and could go no farther.

And Pearl thought of her cowboy. "I won't do it," she said.

She had never spoken up like this before, and she was as startled by her vehemence as were the others. But Professor Grogan took it the hardest of them all. For once a genuine expression got past his actor's mask. It was pure consternation. Then he gave himself up to fatherly rage.

"We've got a show going on at ten o'clock," he roared. "Be ready for it."

The girl stared at him sullenly. Something had happened to her in the last few hours. It had come over her, she reckoned, up there at the creek when she had washed off the paint and learned that there were real things in this world, that it was not all phony make-believe. She had washed off her father, too, which was a sad and bitter thing in its way. Her future was in her own hands now.

"When you want me," she said, "call for me." She did not add she would not be there.

She stepped by these men, aware that Dixon was watching the gentle curves of her body rippling under the thin material of her long gown. She saw quick hatred in the eyes of the blonde woman, so she gave her skirt an extra flirt as she ducked under a wire crossing the center of the wagon. On the wire a drawn canvas curtain separated her tiny dressing room and living quarters from the rest of the wagon. She yanked the curtain so sharply its rings squealed on the wire.

Then she sat down on the little brass-studded trunk and clenched her fists very hard and bit her lower lip to keep from crying again. Link Dixon spoke up from beyond the curtain.

"That girl's got spirit," he said.

There was anticipation in his voice. The professor sighed agreement. But there was nothing audible by way of comment from Maymie.

The bottle burbled. The men drank another toast. They talked in low voices, discussing Long Bow City, and Link Dixon said they would have to make their money and move on in a damn big hurry. There was no telling, Dixon said, when the news would break. They had better be well on their way before then.

Pearl had no idea what that news might be, but quickly gathered that it had something to do with real estate because she heard Dixon say that a smart and brilliant spieler like Professor Grogan could peddle city lots at a terrific price and with terrific speed. That was the important thing—get rid of the land before any one learned that the division point of the new railroad was going to be ten miles away from Long Bow Creek and that this land was valueless.

Pearl sat up straight at that. Then she shrugged her shoulders. She would be gone long before ten o'clock. She would not be on hand to share in this crooked deal even though Dixon was talking glowingly of her. The princess, Dixon was saying, would pack every man within miles into the big tent. They could not hope to find better bait than the princess. It was in the bag.

A FEVER came over the girl as she listened. She got off her trunk and lighted the tiny lantern that swung from the bow over her head. She unlatched the trunk and began to lay out clothes on the narrow bunk bed. She had a doeskin outfit beside the grey homespun dress, and a calico blouse and skirt. She had some good strong walking shoes. These she arranged before her. She took out other things, too, but put most of them back. A dress that had been her mother's she could not carry with her. But she could take that old Florentine brooch. She made a little pile of jewelry she had managed to hide from her father during some of his lean periods.

Then the wagon bed creaked under the movements of men and her father spoke to her.

"Going up to the Palace," he said, "to get things organized. Be back in half an hour."

"Yes, Professor," she answered, feeling as if she would choke.

She had not even dared hope for such luck. In half an hour she could find that nameless cowboy and vanish forever from Long Bow City. In half an hour she would be turning her dreams into reality.

She heard her father climbing down from the wagon—and the man whose eyes reminded her of a snake. He would never look at her bare ankle again, she thought. Then this man muttered something and the woman answered, and Pearl had just glanced up when the woman parted the canvas curtain and poked her head in.

"Evenin', dearie," Maymie said. "May I come in?"

"No," Pearl said, her voice almost soundless under its fright.

Maymie came on through the opening she had made in the curtain. She stood there a moment with her feet planted solidly on the planks. Maymie, Pearl thought, must have been a pretty girl once. But her china blue eyes had gotten cruel and cold somewhere along the line, and her curvaceous figure had run to beef.

"Runnin' out on us?" Maymie said.

"Certainly not," Pearl answered.

The wrinkles at the corners of Maymie's eyes deepened. "Then you better start puttin' on the paint, kid," she said. "Need some help?"

"No," Pearl said.

Pearl was in a panic. If she refused to color herself she would be exposed. If this woman stayed around Pearl would never get away to find her cowboy. She had to stall for time.

She turned her back on Maymie and began to color her legs. Maymie took a deep, wheezy breath as she eased herself down onto Pearl's bunk. She said: "Link's my man—savvy?"

"I can take him away from you," Pearl said.

"Just try it," Maymie said, and Pearl

thought Maymie was frightened. She had found one tiny vulnerable soft spot in this outfit. She glanced around at Maymie. The older woman was really afraid of her.

"What'll you do?" Pearl asked.

"I'll kill you," Maymie said.

MEN were hitching the four-horse team to the wagon. All around a strange excitement throbbed through the soft night air. Maymie was keeping her guard, backed up by Link and another man. They were being very careful that Pearl did not run out on them, and Maymie was making sure that Pearl was ready when the big sell came. Pearl never had a chance. By ten o'clock she was in the grass skirt. She was Princess Pearl of the Sandwich Islands.

The wagon began to move, jolting over ruts, out of the lot into the street where men whistled and howled and shook the stars with the rebel yell. The professor had worked rapidly, spreading news that something big and special was up. Everyone was on the dusty road to see the show. Colt pistols barked into the sky and someone with a fife, accompanied by a drum, began to whistle a giddy tune.

Then the wagon squealed as it took a sharp corner, and a moment later it halted. Inside it Pearl pretended indifference; but by the echoes of the voices and the strange difference in their quality she deduced that the wagon had been driven into one of the big tents. She could hear the professor working up a spiel and the sharper voice of Link Dixon shouting to the mob!

"Step up, boys—free whiskey. Step up, boys—everything on the house."

She heard her father's voice saying, "Princess . . . Isles . . . hula . . . right in your laps . . . ." and the howl of the mob rose to the high pitch of hunting wolves on a cold winter's night at the smell of fresh blood. Then everything happened so fast the girl hardly knew what was going on. Her father opened the rear curtains of the wagon and glanced in. "We got a runway here," he said quickly. "You'll dance down it and along the top of the bar. This wagon's at the end of the bar. Make the route once, then come back. We're going to make them buy up before you really give it to them."

It had been her intention to refuse to do this. But with the crowd silent now and her father beating on the tom-tom the old mystery of the dance and the force of habit pushed her out onto the bar top. For a second she blinked at the bright lights, at the whiskey kegs, with their tops bashed in, at each end of the bar, and at the dippers in those kegs that were idle now only while she was in her act. Then slowly she began to whirl, to move down that bar, out onto the rude runway that had been set up in twenty minutes on carpenters' horses. It went right through the mob so close she could feel the breath of the excited men on her legs.

Then suddenly at the very end of the runway she halted. She stopped with her arms still out, her hands in the Hawaiian position of "Earth," and she knew she had come to the end of her trail as Princess Pearl.

All around her men were waiting for her to go on, but she could not take a step. The professor's tom-tom was throbbing urgently now as she looked over this crowd for the one man she needed to back her hand. Then she saw him, outside there, sitting in the saddle of his big horse.

He lifted a hand to her, and she said in a quick rush to the silent people:

"It's a fraud—everything's a fraud!"

"Yip-ee-eee—" the Texan broke out with a cowboy yell.

"The division point's going to be ten miles—" the girl hurried.

But she got no farther. Maymie was screaming to drown her out. Link Dixon, who reacted more quickly than the professor, was rushing down the runway to shut her up. The cowboy was rolling his spurs, plunging that big horse right through the mob. He had not yet reached the end of the runway when Link Dixon got there and flung one arm around Pearl's waist. Link twisted her back over his hip, clamping her in a grip that halted her breathing. Desperately she began to fight silently with him. She jammed her right elbow into his stomach and almost got away when his grip on her loosened. By then Dixon had seen the cowboy. He was shaking his right shoulder to drop his double-barreled derringer from its clip up his sleeve. It was probable that the cowboy did not even know the gambler was armed.

But Pearl had spent most of her brief life among tinhorns and outlaws, and she knew exactly what was going on. She turned her slender body in the man's arm and bit his right wrist just as the pistol grip settled in his palm. She bit so hard he screamed in sudden pain and fired his derringer involuntarily

into the planks of the runway. Then the cowboy leaned from his horse and smashed one big fist straight into the gambler's face. As Dixon staggered back to tumble into the mob the cowboy picked up the girl and set her across the saddle before him.

He let go with the wild rebel yell, slipped six-shooter from holster again and sent a quick little volley through the roof of the tent. He hit one of the acetylene lights, and put spurs to his horse.

In seconds, it seemed, they were outside on the deserted street, on the dusty road that the professor's salesmanship had emptied of traffic. Someone took a pot shot at them but missed. Pearl curled up close against the cowboy's broad chest.

IT WAS a couple of days later when a man she knew only as Matt appeared at their hide-out. Matt was driving a broken down old buckboard that carried an ancient brass-studded trunk. A stab of fear struck through the girl when she saw what it was.

"The professor sent it," Matt said. "Figured a grass skirt ain't fitten clothes for a lady about to get married." Matt looked her over and there was laughter in his eyes. She wore shirt and trousers that were much too big for her, rolled up at sleeves and legs. They would just about fit the cowboy she was with, he reckoned. There was no sign of a grass skirt or brown paint. "He left Long Bow," Matt added. "The preacher's still there, though."

Then Matt drove away, and suddenly Pearl knew she would miss her father. There was a poignant little sorrow in her heart for him, after all.

"He knew where we were," she said.

The cowboy put a strong arm around her.

"It's going to be a better weddin'," the cowboy said softly, "now that we sort of have his permission."

"Yes," Pearl said, and she let herself fit snugly into the arm that was about her slim waist.

Coming in the next issue

Home Front

A Novelette of a Cowboy Who Comes Home From War to New Dangers

By AUSTIN CORCORAN

Buttons

A Short Story About a Girl Whom the Sheriff Loved

By WILLIAM FREEMAN HOUGH

The Lone Matchmaker

By Agnes Best Nafziger

JUNIE HAD a big problem on her hands, with two sisters twenty-two and twenty-three and still unmarried. So she went to work on it.

JUNIE was having a wonderful time at the schoolhouse dance. Her feet ached, it was true, but that was because the boys wouldn't let her sit out a single dance. They whirled and danced and swung her around until she was too dizzy to stand.

Oh, it was fun to be popular! It was fun to be the prettiest girl in the whole county, to have the men touch her hair softly and say, "Is it pure gold, Junie?" To have them stare at her satiny skin in wonder and hold her small white hands as if they were precious and just too delicate.

Three cowboys from down Spoon Creek way were claiming this dance. Thrilled to the tips of her high-heeled slippers, Junie fluttered her silky lashes and begged them to be quiet.

"If you're going to fight," she announced, "I won't dance with any of you. I don't like fighting of any kind!"

"You heard the lady," snapped Bill Naylor, coming up. Bill had curly red hair and slanting green eyes full of the devil. "Outa my way, you wall-eyed knotheads. Junie came with me, she's my girl, and this is my dance."

"Says you and how many?" roared a towhead. The second cowboy, a husky black-haired giant, pushed Bill and the other two to one side with his huge arms, advancing on Junie with determination.

Junie didn't know whether to be thrilled or afraid at these four most popular men in the room fighting over one teensy little dance with her. The next instant she didn't have time to wonder how to feel, for all four were a mass of flailing arms and sprawling legs from four bodies twisted and clamped into one.

Sheriff Joe Beal suddenly towered over the squirming heap. "Bust up this ruckus!" he thundered. "Remember there's ladies here." The fight dissolved like magic. "That's good

boys," said the sheriff as he took Junie in his arms and watzed to the opposite side of the room. Junie looked up at him adoringly. Joe Beal was lean and dark and brawny, with steely-grey eyes that could see right through a person. Of course he was old—Junie's sister Dora claimed Joe Beal was at least twenty-nine.

"Why didn't your sisters come to the dance?" he asked.

Junie's blue eyes clouded. If anything could mar the brightness of this wonderful evening, it was remembering her sisters. Poor Patience and Dora. What a sad life they led! How unhappy but brave they were, never letting on for a single instant that their lives were practically over, that their future loomed bleak and dreary with nothing more exciting to do than run the big old ranch left the three sisters by their parents' death.

For Junie's sisters were twenty-two and twenty-three, and as far as Junie knew not a single man was in love with them. They were old maids.

"A neighbor butchered for us today and Patience is helping Dora make sausage and render out lard tonight," explained Junie practically, "Of course at their age they'd rather stay home and do things like that than dance," she added.

"They would, eh?" murmured the sheriff, a gleam in his eyes. "Or maybe Patience, after riding that wild Beggar Rim country to round up cattle, might not feel much like dancing. And Dora, after cleaning the big old ranch house—but of course you helped her, didn't you?"

Junie looked at him uncertainly. She never did understand Joe Beal. "Of course I helped," she said indignantly. "I washed all the lamp chimneys and trimmed the wicks. Dora wouldn't let me do any heavy work. She wanted me to have a good time tonight. I guess she still remembers what good times she used to have long ago."

"At twenty-two we hope she does," agreed the sheriff. "Since your father died, don't believe either she or Patience has much time to spend remembering. I'm sorry, Junie, I'll have to turn you back to your young friends. My deputy Saunders just came in and signalled me."

"You mean there's trouble somewhere?" breathed Junie, her glance going to the dangerous-looking gun which Saunders had worn into the dance hall. Joe Beal smiled reassuringly as he left. Bill Naylor was at her side instantly.

"Let's go home," suggested Junie. "This has been so exhausting, Bill." She looked after the departing sheriff resentfully. Bringing up Patience and Dora had spoiled her evening; she couldn't enjoy herself, thinking of them home alone.

Bill was eager to go. In the yellow-wheeled buggy he would at least have her to himself. Under the soothing balm of his admiration and his steady stream of flattery, Junie was herself again—sparkling, sweet and gay—until the big old ranch house loomed into view. That reminded her again of Dora and Patience, the best sisters in all the world, who were practically old maids before they'd had the chance to be young. She shuddered. Instantly Bill's big hand covered hers. "Cold, honey?"

Junie looked at him impatiently. Cold in July? Then she saw the look in his eyes and knew his question had been just an alibi to hold her hand. Next thing he'd be expecting a kiss. As he stopped the buggy in the dark shade of the big cottonwoods at the gate, she jumped quickly down. Here she just had to hold these men off all the time, while poor Dora and Patience sat home alone! And they were, or at least had been, good-looking girls. Dora was very pretty, with her pale hair and wide, solemn blue eyes. And Patience had an air about her—she was tall and slim and very dark, and her eyes had secrets and strange thoughts in them when she looked at you.

But they didn't understand how to get a man.

Bill Naylor jumped out after Junie. He still wanted a kiss, she could tell, but she wasn't going to give it to him. She was almost seventeen, but she didn't intend to kiss any man until she was seventeen and a half—not even Bill.

"Good night, Bill, I had simply a glorious time! It was so wonderful of you to take me!" Before he could make any sort of answer, she was running toward the house, and a lamp went on in the kitchen. That meant Patience was looking for her young sister. Bill, disgruntled, got in the buggy and swished the whip above the horse's head, sending the animal galloping down the road, the buggy careening after.

Junie, worried that he might go back to the dance instead of home, watched until he reached the fork in the road. She saw with

satisfaction that he turned east toward Bland. Bill was camping with a Forest Service bridge crew just above the town. Thirty years ago a mine boom had drawn thousands to Bland; now the population consisted of some two dozen families, and about as many men at work on the bridge.

WITH a happy little smile—the evening had been highly successful for June—she turned back to the house. The night was silvery and still, a star-sprinkled sky spread from end to end of the high mountain valley. A moon, just pushing through a clump of cottony white clouds, threw a pale glow over the yard. Junie suddenly stopped dead, stifling a scream of horror.

Just below the porch steps, in a pool of light from the kitchen lamp, lay the huddled figure of a man, his wool shirt blood-soaked. He stirred a little and groaned. Junie went down on her knees and looked into the black-bristled face of a man about twenty-five. As she stared, the eyes opened, to look up at her with a start.

Junie drew in her breath. This man was good-looking. Even curled up as he was, she could see he was tall and well built . . . Not that Patience could be too particular, not at her age. For why couldn't this be a man for Patience? Dumped right at her doorstep.

By the time the door opened and Patience, in a long brown corduroy robe, appeared in the lighted doorway, Junie had a story all ready. After all, you had to help Fate a little, especially with anyone as stubborn as Patience. "That you, Junie?" called Patience.

Junie ran to her. "There's a man—look—he was trying to frighten away a gang of rustlers down by Spoon Creek, and they shot him. We've got to help him, Patience; he's hurt bad."

Patience, who never got excited, walked to the wounded man and looked at him. He was moaning softly. "Wake up Dora," Patience ordered. "And spread a blanket on the front room couch."

Junie obeyed, and the two older sisters, pulling the man to his feet, supported him between them to the couch. Dora calmly cut away the man's shirt and dressed the flesh wound just below the shoulder with deft fingers. Dora had always been handy fixing broken bones, nursing sick animals and tending ailing old people. A real jewel for some man, and here she was an old maid. Junie set her small jaws squarely. Dora wasn't going to be an old maid, nor Patience either, not if she, Junie, could help it.

"Patience, you'll have to ride over to Dobbs' ranch and phone for the doctor," said Dora. "I'll watch him; this may start bleeding again."

The wounded man started up. "Hey, no doctor! I feel fine. By morning I'll be on my way."

"Nonsense," said Patience brusquely. "You need a doctor. It's only twenty minutes by horseback to Dobbs' ranch."

The man glared, his eyes feverish. "I tell you I don't like doctors, they always make me worse! Wait until morning anyway. It's after midnight now, ain't it?"

The sisters debated in the kitchen and decided it would be all right to wait until morning. "At a time like this, a telephone would be handy," murmured Patience worriedly. With her black hair falling loose instead of wound into the practical knot she usually wore, Patience, in spite of her twenty-three years, was beautiful. Junie sighed. That beauty was bound to fade any day now.

"Get to bed, child," Patience told Junie. "Dora and I kill keep an eye on him."

"Poor man," said Junie tremulously. "He almost got killed."

Patience looked at her sharply. "How did you know? Who is he anyway?"

"Why, he's Amos Horn!" declared Junie. She was pleased the way the name just popped into her head.

"Amos Horn?" echoed Patience. "And how did you meet him—before this, I mean?"

Junie shook her golden head mysteriously. "Never mind. But do all you can for him. He was willing to risk his life—for us." She brushed by her sister before Patience could demand details, and hurried to bed. After all, she was tired. She'd danced for five hours straight and kept about two dozen eager cowboys on good behavior. It wasn't always easy to be so popular.

She intended to get up early in the morning before either of her sisters and warn the stranger that his name was Amos Horn. But habit was too strong; Junie didn't waken until the coffee and bacon fragrance from the kitchen came floating through the house. She darted up then, into her clothes, and ran to the front room. The man was awake and Dora was helping him with his breakfast.

SEEN by morning light, rested, and his dark hair brushed, Amos Horn was handsome. "Good morning, Mr. Horn—that is, Amos," she said airily. "You're better."

"Practically cured," said Amos, with the merest flicker of blankness at his name. "How could I help it, with three such gorgeous nurses?" His bright smile included Dora and Junie as well as Patience who had entered to stand at the foot of the couch quietly, not one whit excited by the compliment. Junie felt a surge of anger. It was plain to see why Patience was manless. She could at least look pleased at Amos' words; no man liked a woman who let his compliments slide past her like so much empty air.

Dora didn't seem impressed either. In a cool, business-like manner she took Amos' dishes to the kitchen.

"Don't talk, Amos." Junie turned all her radiant, smiling attention on him, smoothing his pillow with deft little hands. "You've been very sick. You even forgot your name. You looked so blank when I called you Amos."

"Did I?" said Amos. "It wasn't forgetfulness, Miss Junie. I was plumb paralyzed after one look into your eyes. I have never seen such blue in my life except maybe once—the skies of Panama."

"You—you've traveled?" breathed June, in awe.

"Everywhere. But I came here—to meet you."

"Junie!" called Patience from the kitchen. "I need you."

Junie skipped away, smiling over her shoulder. Patience was busy at the big range; by this time of morning she'd done half a day's work. "Come here, Junie," she said in a low voice that would not carry to the front room. "You slip out of the house, ride to Dobbs' ranch and phone the sheriff at Creek City—quick." Creek City was the county seat, about an hour's ride away. "Tell Sheriff Beal we've got a wounded man here, a man who refuses to have the doctor."

Junie stared. "You mean," she gasped finally, "you suspect Amos—Amos—of being an outlaw or something?"

Patience's firm mouth tightened. "I said nothing of the kind, Junie. I simply said he refused to have a doctor, and I think Joe ought to know about it. Now hurry. I should be out on Beggar's Rim today, getting the rest of those cattle, but I won't leave Dora alone with that man. Don't tell him you're going, just slip out."

Junie could have cried with vexation, but Patience was the sort of person you obeyed. She got her pony at the corral, saddled him and took the west turn at the forks. Behind her towered the sheer, picturesque precipice with the solid rock shelf known as Beggar's Rim. A famous trail along which many a daring outlaw had escaped to the brush country wound along the very edge of the Rim—a trail sober-minded and cautious people avoided.

Junie, looking up at the dizzy heights now, remembered the time she'd see Patience racing her horse recklessly down that trail in pursuit of a bunch of cattle on the slope below. Junie's heart had simply gone from her body, along with her breath. Patience wasn't afraid of anything—not shooting or fighting or breakneck mountain slopes. Sheriff Beal had happened to come along just then, to stop beside Junie and stare with her at the vanishing figure of the girl rider.

HE HAD not said a word, but Junie remembered how he'd let his breath out carefully when Patience had ridden safely past a five-hundred-foot sheer drop. He'd glared at Junie in a strange, furious way, his face oddly drawn, then ridden on without a word. Junie had shaken her head; she never could understand that Joe Beal.

Nor could she understand Patience, for that matter. Reporting the handsome Amos Horn to the sheriff! Instead of taking advantage of a heaven-sent opportunity, a man dropped right at her door.

Junie drew her pony up short as a man on a big sorrel horse rode around the curve. The saddle glittered with silver trimmings, and the rider had a gold band on his hat and silver conchas on his vest and belt. Junie looked up at him with the glowing wide-eyed smile she always gave men until she found out they were married.

"Howdy, sister," said the man in a friendly way, his large eyes frankly admiring. He had a pale face with a silky mustache and very red lips. He rode his horse with a bored, lazy ease and his clothes were more elegant—fawn-colored and silver-trimmed— than cowboys hereabouts wore. "This your home range?"

Junie nodded. Now this man was really

Patience's type! For Patience, in spite of hard work and riding and grubbing on the ranch, had an air of aristocratic elegance and aloofness which Junie noted in this man at once. "But not yours, I take it?" she said politely.

"Nope; I come from the flats. Nothing like that." He nodded toward bleak, towering Beggar's Rim. "I don't suppose," he went on earnestly, "you'd know anything about my pal who was accidentally wounded when we were hunting deer in the hills below here. I went to locate a doctor, and when I got back the locoed young fool had gone off on his own. I been searching the country all night, afraid he is lying helpless somewhere."

"But this is unbelievable!" cried Junie in delight. "Your friend is at our house! He must have crawled to the house—we found him in our yard. My sisters took Amos in and have been caring for him; he's just fine."

"Amos?" repeated the man.

"Amos Horn," said Junie, and bit her lips. "He—he might of been delirious when he told us his name. Won't you come right to the house and see him, Mr.—"

"Fitzhugh," supplied the rider gravely. "Virgil Fitzhugh."

An elegant name befitting an elegant man, thought Junie, eyes sparkling. "My name is Junie Pender," she volunteered. "And we go this way to the Pender ranch house."

They rode side by side, the morning sun glinting on Junie's gold hair, on her soft pink cheeks. "What is that tremendous pile of stone?" asked Fitzhugh, scowling with distaste. "Looks as if a trail runs up it."

"That's the Beggar's Rim, and there is a trail, and it's terribly dangerous," said Junie, shuddering. "Anybody wanting to get out of this country in an awful hurry uses the trail on Beggar's Rim. But they have to be in an awful hurry."

"Ah," mused Virgil. "Where does this strange trail start?"

Junie indicated the rugged eastern horizon vaguely. "Off in a gulch," she said absently. There were more interesting things to discuss than old, hidden trails. How exciting to have two handsome men turn up like this! One for Patience and one for Dora.

THE SISTERS however did not appreciate the fact, when Junie and Virgil rode up. Instead of being thrilled at a second handsome man practically thrust into her arms, Patience was furious because Junie had not called the sheriff. She was definitely cool to Virgil, whose charm simply filled the room the instant he entered it. He was tall and slim; he was impeccable; he was unbelievably demonair with that silky blond hair and fair skin. Patience should be swooning with delight, for Virgil was plainly smitten by her looks. She didn't seem to realize she wouldn't have those looks much longer, and should make the most of them right now.

Instead this aging spinster sister of Junie's seemed actually annoyed by Virgil's repeated compliments, his rushing to wait on her. Coolly she would turn on him her large dark eyes, with their unreadable thoughts, and Virgil would subside, his bright charm fading, only to flare up again a minute later with renewed efforts.

"Your sister doesn't like me," sighed Virgil to Junie, as Patience went to the kitchen. Amos was sitting up on the couch, and Junie saw him try to squeeze Dora's hand as Dora adjusted the pillow for him, and Junie saw Dora practically snatch her hand away. Being coy and bashful was all right, Junie guessed, but anyone in Dora's desperate plight was pretty foolhardy to risk either.

"Patience doesn't like you?" said Junie, bringing her attention back to Virgil. "Oh, that's just her way!" Junie's blue eyes were very earnest. "She's so reserved."

Patience called from the kitchen. "Junie, I need you!"

Junie, humming gayly, danced her way to the kitchen. Patience was mixing biscuit dough, her long hands moving tensely. "Junie, stand close to me—this is important—you must manage to slip away and call the sheriff just as fast as you can. And this time don't stop for any reason!"

"For heaven's sake!" exclaimed Junie in exasperation. "Are you afraid they'll kidnap you two old maids?"

"Listen, you little fool! Do you know who Amos Horn is? He's wanted in Texas and plenty other places for robbery—"

Junie stared. Her heart shot to her boots. In a flash she remembered where she'd seen the name Amos Horn: in last week's paper—a warning to the people to watch for two robbers, the brothers Scawen and Amos Horn, believed to have headed for this locality.

Junie's lips were dry. "But he isn't Amos Horn," she managed. "I only made that up."

"You made up pretty good," came a voice

behind them, and the two girls whirled. Virgil Fitzhugh had slipped into the room noiselessly, and now he stood there in his lithe, bored way and smiled his charming, brilliant smile. But in his hand was a pointed revolver, and his eyes were like frozen gold. "Only it happens that is Scawen in there, and I am Amos. Which doesn't matter. What does matter is that nobody will be leaving this house until we've had our chance to get a long ways from here."

He stopped as there came, plainly, the beat of a horse's hoofs on the road winding far below. "Who's that?" he demanded through set teeth.

"PROBABLY just Bill," came hoarsely from Junie. "He comes here a lot."

"Bill, huh? Well, if that's Bill, we'll have to stop him," said Virgil, smiling again and motioning to the two girls to walk ahead of him. Passing the door to the front room, Junie tried frantically to signal to Dora. The glimpse she got of Dora was disheartening. The wounded man, sitting on the couch, held a gun on her.

"Step out on the porch," ordered Virgil. "When your friend comes up here, tell him there's nobody here and send him home, or I'll send him—elsewhere. Understand?"

Junie's wide blue eyes were fixed on the road where Bill, if he came, would appear. The muscles of her stomach tightened into a stony lump. If Bill came, he wouldn't go back—not until he'd found out why the girls acted so strange. He'd go straight into the house, straight into the outlaw's gunfire.

Junie's eyes clapped shut in a flash of pain. Bill was her man, truly her man. If anything happened to Bill, she couldn't stand it.

Slowly her eyes opened. The hoofbeats were going on. It wasn't Bill at all. But those moments had shown her what might happen, what must not happen. She whirled on Virgil.

"Sooner or later Bill will be here, and maybe with him a posse!" she cried. "You two can't fight a whole posse. I'll take you to the Rim trail. I know where it is, all hidden in the brush. It's your only chance to get away."

"How do I know you wouldn't be leading us into a trap, Goldilocks?" inquired Virgil contemptuously. "Patience here would run for the sheriff the minute we're gone."

Junie shook her blond curls. "Not if I go with you—like a hostage, don't you see? I'll see you on the Rim; from there on you'll be safe. The sheriff is at the county seat, an hour away. And Patience will lie to him if he should come here, won't you, Patience? You'll steer him wrong, or Bill, or anybody."

"Because if you don't," said Virgil, "this pretty little sister will never come home, Patience."

"I never heard anything so crazy," said Patience. Her voice was still calm, but her eyes had burning red lights in them and her sun-tanned skin was oddly greyish. "You're not going, Junie."

"But I am!" Junie stamped her foot. "If there's fighting here, somebody will be killed, and that's foolish." She stepped close to her sister. "I'll be all right, Patience!"

"No," said Patience. "If anyone goes, I'll go. I know that trail better than you do."

"We'll take Goldilocks," said Virgil. "She's the baby of the family; nobody'll want to see her get hurt. Besides, she's much more pleasant company. Besides, you, Patience—" he lifted his gun a little—"got nothing to say about it. Get us a horse for my brother; he lost his."

A few minutes later they were ready to leave, the wounded man on Dora's black mare, Virgil on his sorrel, and Junie on her light bay. Junie's blue eyes were very bright and excited. "Don't forget," said Virgil to the two older sisters, "if we hear anybody following us, it's too bad for Junie here."

The girls' faces were set, frozen. They made no answer.

"Don't worry," called June blithely. "I'll go with them just to Bland—after that they can race off by themselves."

"Bland?" Virgil picked up the word instantly.

"An old ghost town just before we hit the Rim trail. It's been deserted for ages, not even a prospector left," explained Junie impatiently. "My goodness, you're not afraid of ghosts, are you?"

"Just so you're sure it's a ghost town," said Virgil.

"You can tell before you get into it if anyone's living in it. Live towns," said Junie, "got chimneys with smoke, and horses in the streets."

VIRGIL grunted. "You're right. We can tell all right."

"See, Patience?" Junie dimpled. "They're too smart to fool, so be careful! And I'll turn back at Bland." She waved, as

spurred her horse to a sedate jog trot. "We don't want to go too fast," she confided to Virgil. "It's hard on horses. And it might start your shoulder to bleeding again," she added to the wounded man.

The road lifted steeply over granite-studded earth, through belts of fir and spruce forests and silvery-green aspens.

"When we hitting that high trail?" demanded Virgil impatiently.

"Yeah," said his brother, "I can go faster'n this. I'm all right."

Junie turned to beam on him. "You're so brave," she cooed, "but I'm not going to let you hurt yourself."

They were close to Bland now, and Junie felt her heart racing. If Patience hadn't understood . . . if she hadn't acted promptly. . . . The winding road went between two sheer mountain walls, on which were perched tumbled-down houses and stores of the busted gold boom. Rusty tin roofs flapped as the usual strong wind lashed through the canyon. Junie held her breath, her glance sweeping the lower houses where the few families remaining still lived. The forest service camp, near the bridge, was invisible from here.

No sign of life. Not a thread of smoke from the chimneys. The little town of Bland lay dead and abandoned. Junie let out her breath. Patience was smart. In anything like this, she took a hint right off.

Virgil, who had stopped to study the place warily, nodded to her to go on. "Ghost town is right. Nothing stirring. We won't stop to talk to any ghosts today."

"But this is as far as I was going," said Junie. Her mouth was dry. She didn't like the look Virgil turned on her.

"I'm not that simple," he snapped. "You don't turn back yet, Goldilocks. You're too good company."

She felt cold prickles going down to her toes as the hoofbeats of the three horses echoed emptily on the old street. The wind howled dismally.

"All right—lift 'em high!" came a sharp order out of thin air. "You haven't got a chance!" Junie's hands went up as she looked about her. From the broken windows of the Bland National Bank and the paneless ones of the Rigby Hotel, from the roof parapet of the once-elegant Opera House and from the ally between Mrs. Gard's Rooms and the Bloody Bell Saloon stared the ominous steel eyes of rifle barrels.

QUICK—lift 'em!" barked the voice, and Junie almost giggled. Bill Naylor had a voice that would keep a windmill going when he was mad. As the brothers reluctantly raised their hands, men appeared behind the gun barrels, circling closer and closer—Bill Naylor and a dozen men from the bridge crew.

While the latter took charge of the two Horns, Bill drew a pale and trembling Junie off to one side. Bill was looking pretty pale himself.

"Oh, Bill," she said, clinging to him, "it worked! Patience got word to you!"

"Sure," said Bill hoarsely. "She raced right to Dobbs' ranch and used the Forest Service phone to our office up here, before she even called the sheriff. We got to work—hid our horses and had everybody douse their fires so no smoke showed." Bill's jaws snapped together. A wonder so deep it was awe glowed in his eyes. "It was all your idea, Patience said. You thought of it, and risked the whole thing."

Four horses came tearing up the street, the rangy Sheriff Beal in the lead and Patience a close second, followed by the deputy Saunders and Dora. They stopped by Bill and Junie. Patience leaped from the saddle to grab Junie to her.

"Junie, you're all right, they didn't hurt you!" she gasped—Patience, who never got excited. Patience was crying, choking over sobs, and Joe Beal, dismounting, put his arms around her.

"There, there, honey," he soothed. "It's all right now. Junie can sure handle the men, even outlaws. You didn't need to worry."

Junie stared astounded. She looked up at Bill. He nodded, grinning. "Sure. Him and Patience. Likewise Saunders and Dora."

It took Junie a few seconds to get her breath—a few seconds in which she recalled Joe Beal and Saunders had been around the ranch quite a lot, but just business calls, she'd been sure.

"Didn't you know?" asked Bill, surprised.

"Didn't I know!" repeated Junie indignantly. "My goodness, what do you think I've been doing all along—scheming day and night to get my sisters married before they got too awful old? I'm glad that's done." With a sigh she turned to Bill; her dazzling smile was for him alone. Her troubles were over. Handling Bill was nothing to getting a man for Patience and Dora.

THE STORY SO FAR:

JUDY RAYNOLDS arrives at the vast Ventura ranch to visit her uncle, PETE RAYNOLDS, who is killed before she has a chance to get well acquainted with him. And on the way out to the ranch she is almost killed when her horse is spooked by a bear skin thrown by some lurking assailant. She is saved by WALT HOLLENGER.

Hollenger is the leader of the small neighboring ranchers whose land is claimed by the Ventura. Pete has allowed them to live on their land but refuses to clear their titles. After his death no one knows what will happen. Meanwhile the ranchers are harassed by cattle raiders who dress as Comanches.

Pete long ago adopted a son, DWIGHT MITCHELL, who is hostile to Hollenger. Yet DON LUIS MORALES, from whose family the Raynolds bought the Ventura, is a good friend of both Hollenger and Pete. Elderly Don Luis also has a fatherly affection for BELLA GAMEL, secretary and companion to Pete Raynolds, and the daughter of a ne'er-do-well peddler, JOE GAMEL, of shady character.

Just before Pete's death he and Walt had words about the land titles, and Pete dies writing a letter saying he fears for his life at Walt's hands. Via Judy and Don Luis, Walt is warned that he is suspected of the murder, and one of his hands, JOHNNY HUME, sneaks into the Ventura house to steal the incriminating letter. Walt, fearing Johnny has ridden into a trap meant for Walt himself, rides after him and, though Johnny is wounded, manages to save him.

PART TWO

JUDY went up the stone steps, walking as easily as she could. The light was turned down low in the living room, but it was enough to guide her way. For a minute she hoped she would be able to slip in unobserved, the way she had left.

From the shadowy corner where the porch swing hung, a figure moved. Judy threw up a hand and smothered the soft cry that rose involuntarily to her lips. Tonight her nerves were jumpy.

"Judy?" It was Dwight Mitchell's voice, and he was speaking low as if he didn't want to be overheard. He crossed the porch and put a hand on her arm.

Judy moved so that the light from inside fell full on his face. She saw that he still looked as white and unnerved as he had looked earlier in the evening when Pete Raynolds' body had first been found.

"Where have you been? You had me scared out of my wits."

With a little shock of surprise, Judy had the feeling that he was telling the truth, that he had really been worried about her.

VENTURA STRIFE

By ELSA BARKER

"I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I—I was upset—scared. I wanted to get out of the house. I went for a ride—and—" She hesitated, then came out with the rest of the truth, "I went to see Don Luis. I thought he ought to know about Uncle Pete."

His hand tightened on her arm. "Don't go away again without telling me. Promise me. I—"

A shadow moved across the light in the living room.

Dwight's hand fell away from Judy's arm, and his voice broke off what he was going to say.

"Bella's waiting for you. She's been worried too."

Bella moved into the doorway. For once she had on something pretty—a soft blue robe that brought out the color in her eyes and pointed up the delicacy of her skin. Her hair was in braids, but it had come loose and fluffed out around her face. She looked young and pretty and gentle. Her gaze swung from Judy to Dwight and back again.

She held open the door and Judy went in. Dwight Mitchell followed. He put a hand on each girl's shoulder. "You girls go on to bed. I'm not sleepy. I'm going to stay down here for a while."

Bella pulled abruptly away from his hand. She bit her lip sharply, and then looked at Judy. "Run on, Judy. I'll be up in a minute. I want to tell Rosina—if she's still in the kitchen—not to wake us too early in the morning. If she has any hot water I'll bring you up some tea. It'll help you to get to sleep."

Judy knew that the brief flash of annoyance she felt was unreasonable. What she wanted, more than anything now, was the quiet sanctuary of her own room. A cup of tea would be warming after her long, chilly ride, but she hated the thought of more talking tonight. Bella would want to know where she had been and why. Bella would likely disapprove.

She turned away from them. "Good night," she said abruptly. "Don't bother with the tea. I don't want anything."

But she knew even as she walked across the room with Bella's hurt eyes following her, that she would not get off so easily. She knew by the feverish, excited color in the other girl's normally pale cheeks, and the restless, jerky way she moved that Bella had something on her mind.

Judy tried to forget her own grief and weari-

ness as she remembered how good Bella had been to her uncle. She must have lived a lonely life here, with no other girls her own age to talk to.

When Bella came in with the tea tray a few minutes later Judy had gotten over her momentary feeling of impatience. "Thank you. You're good to everyone, Bella," she said.

The other girl gave her a brief look that seared through Judy like an electric shock and then she dropped her eyes.

Judy stared at her, wondering if she had just imagined the dislike she thought she had seen in that one quick glance. She put a hand up and rubbed her forehead in bewilderment. "Why do you hate me, Bella?"

The other girl set the tea tray down. She went over to the window and stood for a moment looking out into the blackness without answering. Then she said slowly: "I don't hate you. I'm afraid of you."

"Afraid? Of me?"

"Yes." She turned slowly, and now her pretty face was twisted with bitterness. "How long are you going to stay here?" she asked harshly.

Judy flushed. "Why—I don't know! When Uncle Pete wrote me to come, he said I could make it my home—if I liked it. But now, since he's dead, I haven't had time to think about it. Bella, why are you afraid of me?"

"Look in the mirror if you want to know," Bella Gamel said bitterly. "How old are you anyway? Eighteen? Twenty? Well—I'm twenty-eight. You're a Raynolds. You've always had everything—decent folks, money, good times. And me—I'm just shabby little Bella Gamel. My mother died when I was born and my father is a no-good drunken bum who travels around the country peddling medicine and ribbons to the poor *Mejicanos* and Indians."

Judy stared at her appalled, wondering what she could say that would stop the bitter deluge of words. "But, Bella, I—" she began, then checked herself. "Is it Dwight you're worrying about?" she asked shrewdly.

Bella flushed. She bit her lip, then said defiantly: "Yes, it is. I've loved him ever since I first met him. That's why I got this job with Uncle Pete, so I could be near Dwight. But I'm three years older than he is and it's hard for him to forget that I'm Joe Gamel's daughter. Sometimes I think he loves me, and sometimes he acts like I was his grandmother. But he would have loved me—he would have married me—if you hadn't come."

Judy felt a guilty flush coming to her cheeks. She hadn't had time to pay much attention to Dwight Mitchell, but she had been well aware that he found her attractive. Pretty girls always know things like that.

"You're taking this too seriously, Bella," she said and smiled at the other girl. "Look, here's the way it is. I'm a new girl and Dwight's lonesome; maybe a little bored. That's all it amounts to. But next week—or next month—I won't be new any longer and he'll turn back to you. Because I don't want him!"

BELLA looked unconvinced. "You won't leave—in the morning?" she asked stubbornly.

Judy's little chin set just as stubbornly. "No. I won't leave in the morning—or any other morning—until I'm ready to go. But I promise you, Bella, I'll keep out of your way with Dwight." She smiled at the other girl. "Now let's drink our tea before it gets cold."

Bella shook her head. "I don't want any," she said. "Good night, Judy."

In the doorway she stopped and turned for a moment. She smiled her old strange, gentle smile. "I'm sorry I was so silly, Judy. Uncle Pete's death was a shock to me. I guess I'm tired and a little crazy tonight. Believe me, I don't hate you, Judy. And I'm glad you're going to stay."

Judy stared at the closing door. Which girl was the real Bella Gamel?

She poured herself a cup of tea and drank it quickly. It was only lukewarm and had a sharp, bitter taste, but somehow it seemed to warm the cold little spot around her heart.

Quickly she undressed and crawled into bed. She lay awake for some minutes, her eyes wide open, staring into the blackness. She hadn't thought she could possibly sleep tonight, but soon she felt drowsiness reach its warm, welcome arms around her. With a tired little sigh she snuggled deeper into the pillow.

At that instant there were two quick shots from down below. Judy's eyes flew open again. For a moment she lay there, fighting the drowsiness, wondering if she could possibly have been asleep and dreaming.

Then as if in answer to her thoughts, there was the light, distant pop of another shot.

Judy swung groggily out of bed, opened the door and ran down the stairs. The light was

still on in the big living room, but it seemed to be whirling hazily before her eyes. She reached out a hand and clutched hard at the newel post at the foot of the stairs. Her head was whirling dizzily, and she felt sick to her stomach.

A cowboy was backing slowly out of Pete Raynold's little study, toward the front door of the living room. He looked like just a kid. Blood was marking his path with a steady drip from a widening stain on his shoulder, and he walked with a painful, dragging limp. As she watched, Walt Hollenger appeared in the open doorway. He swung an arm around the wounded cowboy. His eyes swept the room, lifted, and for the space of a heartbeat his gaze met Judy's squarely, then the next instant he was gone.

Judy wanted to call out to him, but her throat muscles seemed paralyzed. She opened her mouth and sucked air in sharply. Her tight clasp on the stair slackened. Her knees gave way with her suddenly and she fell in a little crumpled heap. She was dimly aware of Bella running down the stairs, screaming again, and Dwight Mitchell rushing toward her from the little study. Then everything blacked out.

WHEN she awoke, the sun was shining bright through her bedroom window. Rosina was bending over her, wiping her forehead with a damp, cool cloth, and Bella was standing at the foot of the bed.

Judy's head ached dully, her tongue felt big and thick, and there was a dark brown taste in her mouth. Bella came swiftly around and knelt beside Rosina.

"Judy—darling—are you all right now?"

Judy twisted her head on the pillow. "I think so," she said with difficulty. "Have I been sick?"

Bella looked ready to cry. "It's all my fault, darling. I—I put some sleeping medicine in your tea last night. You looked so tired and upset, and I didn't think it could hurt you. It's something I take all the time. But you just slept and slept. It's nearly noon now, and we've all been so worried."

Judy's head was beginning to clear. Memory came rushing back, and with it a cold little spot of fear.

"I'm all right," she said. "Or I will be as soon as I get up and get some fresh air. Has the sheriff come yet?"

Bella shook her head. "We're expecting him any minute. Pedro got back with your trunk and suitcase a little while ago. They're out in the hall. Shall I send up some breakfast for you?"

Judy shook her head, shivering a little. "For gosh sakes, no," she said crisply. "I'm not an invalid!"

Bella's fair skin turned pink at her tone, but Judy didn't care.

As soon as Bella and Rosina had gone, Judy swung out of bed. She let their voices fade away down the stairs, then she brought in her suitcase. From it she took a well worn carved leather holster and a short barreled .38 with an ivory handle faintly yellowed with use and age.

When she went downstairs a few minutes later the feel of the gun neatly snugged against the hip of her blue corduroy riding skirt gave her courage. She went on through the empty living room to the kitchen, where Rosina was just finishing the last of the breakfast dishes. Her head was still aching too much for her to have any appetite, but she drank a cup of coffee, then went outside.

The big, still house had frightened her with the horrible memories of the night before lurking in every corner, but out here the sun seemed to warm through clear to the chill along her spine.

OUT BY the bunkhouse the hands were gathered in little groups of two or three, quietly talking. They all had on their Sunday clothes, their hair neatly slicked down as if from a dunking in the horse trough. Judy knew they were waiting for the sheriff. She saw Dwight Mitchell among them, and turned the corner of the house quickly, remembering her promise to Bella, hoping he hadn't seen her.

It was a short-lived hope. She heard his steps behind her and turned in dismay, then took herself to task for being such a goose. She intended to keep her promise to Bella, but that didn't mean she had to run or flutter like a scared schoolgirl every time he came near.

Dwight looked at her anxiously. "Are you all right this morning, Judy?"

She nodded, wondering suspiciously just how much of all this concern from everyone about her health was genuine.

"Fit as a fiddle," she said flippantly, lying a little. "Sleeping powders seem to agree with me."

He bit his lip. His eyes met hers briefly then slid away. "Judy, about last night. You liked Walt Hollenger, didn't you?"

"I *do* like him," she corrected him quietly.

Dwight frowned. "You know what he came here for last night, don't you? You know what it means?"

Judy's eyes began to smolder. "Probably he came to steal the letter Uncle Pete wrote, but—" She checked herself abruptly and said instead: "It was a foolish thing to do. He might have got himself killed."

Dwight was still frowning at her, but he looked worried and unsure. He said abruptly: "You've got a gun. Do you know how to use it?"

Judy's blue eyes narrowed. Then she smiled up at him. "Well, this is an old gun of my father's. I haven't shot it for years. Maybe I ought to take it out and see if it will still shoot one of these days."

With a deliberately awkward gesture she flipped it out of the holster, twirled it idly over her thumb a couple of times.

"Don't do that!" Dwight said sharply.

Judy smiled innocently up at him. She raised the gun, and purposely pointing it his way, broke out the cylinder as if she meant to load it, then squinted into the barrel.

Dwight Mitchell moved out of the way. His arm reached out and struck the gun down. "For gosh sakes, Judy! The first thing to learn about a gun is never to point it at anybody—unless you mean business! You're li'ble to kill somebody!"

Judy moved away from him. Her face had gone suddenly white. She slipped the gun back in the holster.

Dwight was watching her intently. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Gosh, kid, I didn't mean to sound so rough!"

A warning bell sounded in Judy's mind. She clutched desperately for her self-control. "That's all right," she said, and her voice was not quite steady. "I should have known better. Look, is that the sheriff and his posse coming?"

DWIGHT turned toward the road, where three men ahorseback had just appeared around a small knob-like hill. Judy saw that his shoulders straightened with a jerk and a muscle in his cheek twitched nervously. He nodded. "That's him."

Judy turned toward the house. "I'll go tell Bella. I'll be in my room if the sheriff wants to talk to me."

Inside her room again, Judy went over to the window, took out the .38 and looked into its barrel. She got out her wire ramrod and tried to ram it through. It stuck at first but she kept on jabbing and finally worked out several small clods of still damp clay.

She picked up a lump and squeezed it between her fingers. For a moment her stomach had a sick, gone feeling as she realized how nearly successful this second attempt on her life had been. In a spirit of sudden bravado she had intended to show Dwight Mitchell just how well she knew how to handle a gun. If she had loaded the cylinder and shot at a target without looking through the barrel—as she had done a thousand times times before and so nearly done this time—she would likely be lying down in the yard now, a case of *accidental* death. For the clay-plugged gun almost surely would have exploded in her hand.

The cold prickle of fear that had been nagging at her since last night vanished and she began to get mad, fighting mad. Things were falling into a pattern and it was a pattern she didn't like.

The other night she had convinced herself that the bear hide thrown at her horse had been meant for someone else, for she had thought no one in the world could possibly have a reason for wanting to harm her.

Her uncle's murder, horrible as it was, had seemed to her one of those things that often happen in a raw frontier country. In the few hours that she had known him, she had seen that Pete Raynolds dealt what he thought was justice with a hard, firm hand. It was the kind of justice that from a rich, powerful man makes enemies, and it had seemed to her likely that his murder was a grudge killing.

But this second attempt on her own life didn't fit that pattern at all.

She pulled a chair up by the window and sat down, trying to think it through. It had never occurred to her that she had any claim at all against the Ventura. Her father, as the youngest son, had been quite willing to take his share of her grandfather's fortune in money, leaving the property to his brother Pete. That he had subsequently lost the money in an ill-considered mining venture didn't make any difference. Pete Raynolds' wealth was his own and she had been perfectly content for it to be that way. It was only right

that he should leave it where he chose, to the adopted son he loved.

But now she began to wonder. Had her uncle ever legally adopted Dwight? As far as she was concerned that would make no difference. But was Dwight afraid her coming might lose him his inheritance? Had Pete Raynolds ever made a will—and if he had, where was it?

Offhand Dwight seemed the person who stood to gain most by both her death and her uncle's, and it was Dwight who had brought up the subject of shooting and almost provoked her into demonstrating what she could do with a sixgun. But there were still many things about her uncle's affairs that she knew nothing about, and she was too level-headed to jump to a conclusion yet.

SHE TOYED idly with the crumbling lumps of clay in her lap. Anyone could have had the chance to plug her gun. The valise had lain beside the road for nearly twenty-four hours, and it had been out in the hall while she lay dead to the world from Bella's sleeping medicine.

And anyone could have stolen her letter, dating her arrival in Las Barrancas, out of her uncle's mail. Anyone could have been waiting in the dark by the side of the road, hoping to spook her horse into throwing her over the edge of the cliff. Anyone, that is, except Walt Hollenger. Walt hadn't done that! In spite of the things they were saying and thinking of him in this house this morning, she didn't believe he had killed Uncle Pete either. For one shocked, horrified instant last night she had doubted him. But it had been in that very instant that she had realized how much that clear-eyed cowboy meant to her—or rather how much he could mean to her if she dared let him.

It had seemed to her that in the brief instant their gazes had locked, Walt's eyes had pleaded with her to understand. And this morning she did understand. It had been a foolhardy thing for him to come here and try to steal the letter her uncle had written, but it was understandable.

There was a knock on her bedroom door, and Rosina's soft voice called through: "The shereef—he want to make talk weeth you, Mees Judee! You come?"

"Thanks, Rosina. I'll be right down."

But she took time to run a clean, oiled rag through her gun barrel. Then she went downstairs.

She was trying to decide how much she should tell the sheriff. Should she tell him about the two attempts on her own life? And should she suggest that he look for Pete Raynolds' will?

When she met Ed Embry she decided to hold her tongue. Sheriff Embry was fat, square-headed and hearty, and he was on friendly, back-slapping terms with Dwight Mitchell. He was evidently enjoying the importance of his latest case, and he was also enjoying some of her uncle's fine old whiskey.

She would let things ride as they were until she learned whom she could trust. Now that she knew of her danger, she was less afraid, for as long as no one knew that she had discovered the plug in her gun, she was fairly safe. Her death must be made to seem accidental, for while many people—so she reasoned—might have a motive for killing her uncle, there were very few who could profit by her death.

She spoke to hard-eyed Clint Barrow, the Ventura foreman, sitting in one corner of the room. He nodded his head without speaking. Judy felt her face flushing a little with anger. It seemed to her that there was suspicion and frank unfriendliness in his gimlet-eyed stare.

Dwight Mitchell jumped to his feet. He held out a chair for her and stood beside her, his hand protectively touching her shoulder.

"Judy, this is Sheriff Embry. Sheriff, Miss Raynolds. You mustn't worry, Judy. This is routine. The sheriff just wants to ask you a few questions."

"I'll be glad to help, but I'm afraid I don't know much that will be of any use to you."

The sheriff's small eyes looked her over admiringly. "I knew your mother when she was about your age, Miss Judy. She was a mighty pretty girl. You look more like her than you do the Raynolds' side of the family."

Judy found she still didn't like him much. She smiled politely. Dwight Mitchell took over.

"What we wanted to ask you, Judy, was whether Uncle Pete said anything to you about where he had put all his important papers?"

Judy's eyes widened with real surprise. She shook her head. "We hardly had a chance to say a dozen words to each other alone after I came. But isn't there a small safe in his study? Did you look there?"

"There's a safe in there, where he used to keep things like that. Bella an' I both know the combination, but when we opened it this morning there wasn't a damn thing in it, except a little money."

"Bella doesn't know anything about it?"

Dwight shook his head grimly. "She's more upset about it than I am. She's been through everything in the house this morning."

Judy was breathing light out of the top of her lungs, and trying not to look as excited as she felt. "What kind of papers were you looking for?"

Dwight hesitated, eyed her narrowly a moment, then said: "Everything. His title to the Ventura, his will, my adoption papers." He stopped and bit his lip. "This sure puts things in one hell of a mess!"

WALT HOLLENGER carried a bowl of thick bean soup and a cup of black coffee in to Johnny Hume. Johnny had lost a lot of blood from his fresh shoulder wound, but it was shallow and Johnny was young, healthy and tough. The hole through his leg meat was already beginning to heal.

All in all there didn't seem to be any reason for Johnny lying like he had all day, with his face to the wall, refusing to eat or even answer except in gruff monosyllables.

Walt set the soup and coffee down on a chair by the bunk. "Want some supper, Johnny?"

The kid didn't answer. Walt rolled a smoke and lighted it.

"If you're worryin' about fallin' so easy into Mitchell's trap, forget it. All of us do damn fool things sometimes. I know you aimed to help me, but it begins to look like the sheriff ain't huntin' either one of us. I ain't seen no sign of him."

Johnny twisted his head on the pillow. "I wish you'd go away and leave me alone," he said shortly. "I don't want any supper, an' I don't want to talk."

Walt took a long drag on his cigarette. His eyes narrowed. "Did you kill Pete Raynolds?" he asked deliberately.

The kid didn't answer. For a moment his eyes met the older cowboy's defiantly, then he turned his face back toward the wall. Walt Hollenger began to feel a little sick. He eyed Johnny's rigid back for a moment, then said quietly:

"I never figgered you was the kind to shoot a man in the back, even a man you hated. But you've been actin' mighty funny lately. You were gone last night at the time Raynolds was killed! If you saw it done, kid, for gosh sakes, speak up!"

Johnny sat up abruptly in bed, his eyes a little wild. "Damn it, I didn't do it!" he shouted violently. "An' I don't know nothin' about it! Now will you get the hell out of here an' leave me alone?"

Walt Hollenger wasn't used to being talked to like that, but he let it pass. He picked up the supper and carried it back to the kitchen. He knew Johnny. The kid had absorbed some kind of an emotional shock last night. In a few days it might wear off, then he would be ready to talk; but until then neither heaven nor hell would be able to drag anything out of him.

Rusty McGowan rode past the window on his way to the corral, and Walt started setting supper on the table. In a few minutes Rusty came in. He had gone sixty hours with only one short nap. His eyes were red-rimmed, and he needed a shave. He dunked his face and hands in the washpan, slicked down his hair, sank down by the table with a tired grunt, then started swearing.

Both cowboys had ridden the better part of the day again trying to persuade the small ranchers that now was the time to get together on some plan to save their holdings.

"You cuss like you had 'bout the same luck I had," grinned Walt. "But talk easy. Ma's in bed, but she's got ears like a coyote."

RUSTY swore again, but softer this time as he dived into the bean pot. "The weak livered so-an'-so's!"

"You can't blame 'em too much for wantin' to wait an see what Dwight's aimin' to do before startin' a ruckus an' makin' him mad."

"They ought to know already what he's going' to do," Rusty said viciously. "If they've got the sense they was borned with." He speared his steak as if he were jabbing a pitchfork into a rattler. "Joe Gamel's been a mighty busy little man today. He beat me to most of 'em. Got 'em stirred up an' half believin' you killed ol' Pete. Lem Jackson's mad as hell."

Walt shrugged. "They'll get over it, time they've had time to think about it a while. I stopped by to see Don Luis this afternoon."

"Yeah? What did he have to say?"

"Plenty. Claims he's got the money to go my bail if I need it. But he don't think Mitchell's got enough case to risk it in court."

"I still think you'd better take a trip till this blows over. Me an' Johnny could handle the ranch for a while."

Walt shook his head, then he grinned. "Ma would tan my britches if I tried that. Besides, Mitchell's hopin' I'll do that very thing—or he'd have the sheriff over here after me long before this. He's givin' me plenty of time to clear out."

"I don't get it."

"He's a dirty fighter, but he scares easy. Pete Raynolds didn't. Right now Mitchell's worried because I been makin' big talk about the shaky title to some of the Ventura land. He don't dare risk takin' it to court, but if he could have killed me housebreakin' last night he'd have been fixed. If he can get me on the run now, it'll be just as good. Then he can start puttin' the squeeze on the other ranchers. He'll keep on with his raidin'. He'll keep edgin' down on more of their land, an' in a couple of years he'll have them so discouraged they'll quit."

Rusty McGowan grinned a little. "Got it all figgered out, ain't you? Well, what do we do next?"

Walt stretched out a long arm behind him for the coffee pot. "Me, I'm still alive an' I'm still here. The next move's up to Dwight Mitchell, an' unless I miss my guess complete, it won't be long comin'."

They both heard a window raised softly in the bunkroom in the back. Rusty McGowan looked at Walt, then he started to get up from his chair. Walt shook his head at him.

"Let him go," he said quietly. "He's got somethin' worse on his mind than the hurts on his body. I don't figger we can help him none by holdin' him. Ma tried talkin' to him today, but even she couldn't do anything with him."

Rusty looked unconvinced. "If he heads back to the Ventura, somebody will pot him sure as shootin'."

"We been treatin' him like a kid, Rusty. Maybe it's time we let him grow up, for a change."

Walt Hollenger sounded a lot surer than he felt. Johnny was only eighteen, impulsive, hot-headed, and not inclined to stop long enough for sane judgment. But he had lived all his life on a raw frontier, where men mature early, and it was time the kid was growing up.

Rusty began stacking the supper dishes. He still looked doubtful.

SUDDENLY Johnny Hume appeared in the back doorway, with his warsack packed. He looked white and shaky, and there was a wild, hunted look in his eyes.

"I'm leakin' out, Walt," he said abruptly. "There's no use you tryin' to stop me. My minds made up."

Rusty McGowan swore. "Hell, who's tryin' to stop you? We heard you slip out that window an' we let you go, didn't we?"

Johnny looked jolted. He turned back to Walt. "I couldn't go that way, Walt, without tellin' you. You an' your ma always been white to me."

"An' this is the way you pay him back!" Rusty said harshly. "Okay, go on. Get out."

"Let him alone, Rusty," Walt said. "He don't owe me nothin'. He's earned his keep."

Johnny's face flushed. "Walt, I know you—"

"Yellow!" Rusty spat the word at him.

Johnny set his bundle down slowly. His right hand dropped to his gun. "Say that again!"

Rusty McGowan laughed. Walt stepped suddenly between them.

"Cut it out, you two! Get goin', Johnny! We don't need you here, if that's the way you feel about it."

The kid's flushed face went white aagin. "I'm not goin'!" he said defiantly. "I'm not scared! I'll prove it to you!" He picked up his warsack and marched back to the bunkroom with it.

Walt looked at Rusty McGowan. "You were kinda rough on him!" he said soberly. "He's just a kid! He ain't had time to find out what the score is yet."

Rusty grinned. "I got him to stay, didn't I?"

But Walt Hollenger was still sober. He couldn't tell Rusty about the doubts he had of Johnny Hume. Doubts that were strengthened by this sudden desire of the kid's to leave.

"I wish you hadn't," he said. "I'll feel responsible for him now." He picked his hat off a nail by the door and pulled on a homemade buckskin jacket. "I'm goin' to ride around an' keep an eye on the stock. Somethin' may break tonight."

Rusty McGowan was never one to shirk his end of a job. He looked at his watch. "I'll turn in now an' relieve you at midnight."

Walt nodded. Night was coming on fast. Its cool breeze felt good on his cheeks as he stepped out the door. There were a few stars out, and by the time he had his horse saddled it was dark.

The pony he picked had a long, swinging gait that was not quite a trot and yet was something more than a fast walk. He could keep it up for hours and cover a lot of ground in one night.

Walt headed him first toward the South Willow Creek strip where Johnny had had trouble a couple of days before. That was the farthest from the home ranch, and where the raiders had struck a couple of times before.

Everything seemed quiet as he rode. Little bunches of cattle bedded down for the night snorted and jumped to their feet as he came close, reassuring him that they had not been disturbed before.

Likewise the Willow Creek *vega* was quiet. He circled it a couple of times, keeping to the edge of the timber, out of the moonlight. Finally he moved on, heading in a homeward direction, taking it slow, covering all the little valleys and pockets hidden down between the hills.

It was past midnight when he turned his horse in the corral. Rusty was already up, with coffee hot. A few hours' sleep made a new man of him. He looked as wiry and alert and ready to go as if he had slept around the clock.

He had a .30-30 strapped in a scabbard on his saddle. He patted it as he swung up.

"Sleep with your windows open," he grinned. "If there's trouble I won't have time to come back. I'll shoot three times if I need help."

Walt took off his boots and rolled into bed with his clothes on. In the next bunk Johnny Hume was sleeping deeply and quietly as if his final decision to stay had released some pressure on his mind.

HOW LONG Walt slept he didn't know, but it seemed to him that his head had no more than hit the pillow when the crack of rifle shots, not too far distant, came clearly through the window. Like a well trained fire horse, he swung out of bed. Half asleep, he buckled on his gun and pulled on his boots. He hit the saddle on the run. His mother poked her head out of her bedroom window. "Go git 'em, boy!" she called.

Walt waved at her as he kicked his horse into a run.

The shots had seemed to come from the east, and Walt headed his pony for a little knoll a quarter of a mile away. On its top he stopped to listen.

Presently there were two more rifle shots, evenly spaced as if Rusty had tried to figure the time it would take him to get on his horse, and was giving him a directional guide. He turned his pony a little south and gave him an extra cut with the spurs, knowing now that the trouble must be in the wide swath of timothy meadow along Oshá Creek. The hay was already cut and stacked, but it had been a warm fall and the grass had grown several inches since. He had a carload of young steers fattening there ready to ship in a few weeks.

Beyond the knoll the sky suddenly flared with a yellow light that quickly grew brighter and took on a reddish tinge. A sudden sprinkling of sixgun fire broke the stillness for a moment, and then it was quiet again.

Walt asked for and got an extra burst of speed from the little pony. Flames from the burning haystack were shooting high into the air now, and above the beat of his horse's hoofs he could hear the faint bawling of disturbed cattle.

Another spot of light appeared as another haystack was fired. Walt was bothered now by the continued silence of Rusty's sixgun, but following a sudden hunch, he cut his pony still farther south, skirting the *vega* down to its mouth where it narrowed into a bottleneck. Out by the third haystack a pinpoint of light flared up and grew brighter, silhouetting for an instant a bronzed, shirtless figure. Walt grabbed his rifle from its scabbard, and aiming against the light, snapped a quick shot.

The man yelled as if he had been either nicked or badly scared by the nearness of the bullet, and reached for his horse and jumped into the saddle. Bright though the moonlight was, there was no use trying to aim the rifle unless he could catch his enemies skylighted by the fire. He could see shadowy figures of horseback men and cattle milling about as if his shot from a new direction had tossed them into indecision. Walt was out of sixgun range now, and didn't dare come in closer lest he run into the flare of light from the stacks.

He kicked the spurs to his pony again and wondered if he would be able to reach the bottleneck in time.

THEN, as if they had been working together on some well rehearsed plan, from back near the knoll above the *vega* he heard Rusty's sixgun open up—slow and deliberate this time as if he were taking as careful aim as the light would permit. There was

an answering crescendo of shots from the dark blob of moving cattle and men. For a moment it looked as if they had decided to split, part of them going back toward the knoll, part toward where he had first shot at them.

That instant's delay was all that Walt needed. His lips curled back from his teeth in a grim smile as he began letting down his lasso.

As his horse hit the mouth of the *vega* he slid from the saddle. He smacked the pony sharply on the rump and sent him clattering on down the canyon. The clacking of steers' hoofs from up the canyon told him the raiders had decided to come on and make their getaway—with a few steers if they could.

There was no moonlight here in the shadowed narrows, but Walt knew this canyon as well as his own front yard. The two tall old pines flanking each side of the trail, hardly more than ten feet apart, were easy to locate.

Walt stretched his lass rope tight at knee height between them. He barely had time then to crawl up the rocky slope to a kneeling position beside a big boulder when the first of the steers reached the rope. They were being pushed hard from behind, and the leaders hit the barrier like a ton of bricks, grunted and took a nose dive, head over heels. He heard a clatter of rocks and then a splash as one of the first ones slid down into the creek.

From that moment on there began such a mêlée as Walt Hollenger had never heard before—a mixture of grunting, bawling, and the clatter of rocks as spooked steers lost their footing trying to turn in the jam and slid or tumble down the hill into the creek. Finally were added to these the shouting and cursing of men.

Sighting back toward the northwest, Walt had some of them skylighted. It seemed almost like shooting clay pigeons at a carnival, he thought grimly as he pulled the trigger, but for once he had no scruples. This gang would have made a clay pigeon of him tonight if they had gotten the chance.

With his first shot a man swayed wide in his saddle, then righted himself. The shot seemed to shake the raiders out of their momentary befuddlement. Almost as one man they yanked their horses around, pulling them back from the jammed, bawling mass of cattle. Walt shifted aim, waited for a clear target to show, then fired again.

He heard the man yell as the bullet struck him, and then his panic-stricken cry raised above the din of the cattle: "For God's sake, you guys! Wait! Give me a hand! I'm—" His voice broke off in a groan and Walt saw him slide out of the saddle as his horse lunged away from the sharp horns of a panicked steer.

Walt fired again and again. But now it was at fast moving targets, targets fleeing back to the *vega,* to cut around across the creek and into the cover of the timber. He thought he scored another hit, but the man kept to his saddle.

Walt took time to reload his gun, wondering if they would open up on him from the other side of the canyon. When they didn't he got to his feet and half ran, half slid down the slope. Down there on the ground, at the mercy of a dozen steers frightened to the point of savagery, was a wounded man.

FORTUNATELY he had fallen slightly above the trail, and his groaning led Walt to him in a hurry. Walt slipped his arms under him, swung him up on his back and carried him to the *vega's* edge, where there would be a level place to lay him down out of the path of the still frightened cattle as they stampeded back out of the bottleneck.

From down below he thought he could hear now the receding clatter of horses' hoofs on rock, as the remaining raiders, swinging their horses back into the trail, made good their getaway.

His prisoner was groaning and cursing half under his breath, but he seemed to be unconscious. Walt struck a match and looked at him.

Some of the bronze paint he wore on his body and face, to make him look like an Indian, had rubbed off in patches. It was a crude job, apparently not intended to stand close scrutiny. A long black wig of horsehair had fallen off and his own hair, under a thick mixture of clotting blood and dirt, showed to be a wiry sandy blond. Walt had never seen him before.

There was a bad cut on the top of his head, as if he had hit a sharp rock when he fell from the saddle. The bullet wound was under his left arm, a little too high for his heart, but it had gone clear through him.

Walt tore his shirt into strips, wound it tight around the man's body, temporarily stanching the wound. Then he filled his hat with water and wiped the blood and paint off the fellow's face.

The man was badly hurt. He might be going to die, but Walt was hoping desperately that he would regain consciousness for a few

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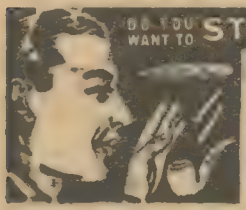

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minutes. Taking this man a prisoner was the luckiest break he had had in over a year. In him he had definite proof that the cattle rustlers were not Comanches but white men, as he had suspected all along. But unless he could bring this man to talk he still had no proof that they were connected with the Ventura.

He heard the sound of horse's hoofs coming slowly and cautiously around the edge of the *vega,* skirting the timber as he had done a few minutes before. His sixgun came out again. Probably the rider was Rusty, but it could be a straggling raider, hoping to slip up on him in the open now that the main fight was over.

He knelt beside the wounded man, his eyes fixed on a little break in the timber through which the rider would have to come.

Then he heard a whistle—a sound like the soft, low, querulous hooting of an owl. Walt relaxed and put his gun back in its holster.

"All clear," he called. "Hurry up! I've got a wounded man here."

Rusty cut out into the open. He didn't have to be reminded how important this man was. He slid his horse to a stop beside them. "He able to talk, Walt?"

Walt shook his head. "He's hurt bad, too bad to pack in on a horse. You go back to the house for the wagon, some whiskey, iodine an' some pillows."

Rusty McGowan swung back into the saddle. "Okay. I won't be long."

Walt went down to the creek for another hat full of water. As he stooped over the water he thought he heard a faint rustling in the bushes across the creek. He froze into immobility, straining his eyes and ears through the blackness. He heard it again, a cautious, rustling step.

CROUCHING low, moving noiselessly, he crossed the creek and crept up into the tall angelico weeds on the other side. Every step seemed to take minutes. Slowly, like a stealthy, wiggling Indian he inched his way forward. Again he heard movement directly ahead, then suddenly from not ten feet away a steer snorted in fright, jumped away and went crashing through the bushes.

Grinning a little sheepishly to himself, Walt turned back to his patient. This night's business, he told himself, had made him as spooky as an old maid.

The prisoner had stopped groaning now,

lying so quiet that Walt had a feeling he was conscious.

"Do you want a drink?"

There was no answer. Walt struck a match and looked down at him. The man's eyes were wide open. He blinked at the light. "Who the hell are you?" he asked hoarsely.

Walt hesitated. "Walt Hollenger."

The man's eyes closed as pain shot through him, then opened again. He swore, long and throatily.

"They—they left me here to die!" he said bitterly. "They—" His voice trailed off weakly.

Walt slipped an arm under him and raised his head a little. He held a hatful of water to his lips. The man took a couple of long, thirsty gulps. Walt dipped his hands in the water and wiped it across the man's blood-covered forehead.

"Thanks, pal!" the man said weakly. "I'll—"

The next instant there was a spurt of flame as a sixgun opened fire from across the creek. Walt felt the body of the man in his arms quiver as the first slug tore into him. Still holding him with his left arm, Walt's right streaked to the sixgun at his hip.

Aiming at those tiny pinpoints of light flashing leaden death at him, he fired . . . once . . . twice . . . three times, then was aware that the gun across the creek was silent.

Plainly he heard the sound of a man running, thrashing his way heavily through the brush. Walt jumped to his feet and started after him. He heard a horse nicker a little farther down canyon and stomp at the ground uneasily. Walt tore through the underbrush of willows and alders toward the sound.

A moment later he heard the clatter of swift-running hoofs on the rocky trail, and knew the killer was getting away. He threw a couple of futile, frantic shots after him but the man was out of range.

Without a horse he had no chance of catching the ambusher. He knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that his prisoner was dead—and with him went his precious chance to learn the identity of these "Comanche" raiders and perhaps even solve the mystery of Pete Raynolds' murder.

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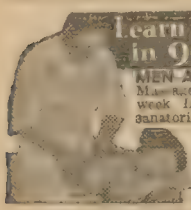

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how smelling of death. Slowly he retraced his steps back into the *vega*. His prisoner lay as he had left him, but when Walt laid a hand on him, his heart was still.

RUSTY McGOWAN was always a profane man, but now for once he stood stupidly staring down at the dead face without saying anything, until the lighted match burned down to his fingers. Then he swore and flipped it away.

"You know him, Rusty?"

The cowboy nodded. "It looks like we ripped the wagon sheet this time, Walt. That's the sheriff's kid brother. Embry brought him from Texas about a month ago an' made him a deputy."

Walt felt the shock of that hit him like a blow across his chest. Rusty went on speaking: "I've been sorta hopin' we might somehow finagle the sheriff on our side. I know Embry's dumb, but I always figgered he was honest. But—well—that kid was all the family he had left, an' he thought the sun rose an' set in him. Even if we can persuade him the kid was runnin' with the wild bunch—which I doubt—he'll hate our guts for killin' him. He'll be out to pin anything on us that he can."

Walt nodded slowly. "We'll have to try to find out who really killed him. I'll get my horse, then as soon as it's light enough I'll try trackin' those boogers out." He rolled the body of the dead man in the canvas Rusty had brought for a stretcher, but he shook his head when the other cowboy reached for his feet to lift the body into the wagon. "We'll leave him here for the time bein'. As long as we can't do anything for him there's no use worryin' ma about it for a while."

The sky was beginning to lighten and dawn was throwing its first faint rosy fingers across the east when they got back to the ranch. As was his custom when he first hit the house, or when he was worried, Rusty started the fire and put the coffee-pot on.

Walt heard his mother calling from her bedroom, and he went and stood in the doorway.

"What is it, Ma?"

"I heard shooting. You all right, Walt?"

"Not a scratch."

"And Rusty?"

"He's okay too."

"Was it another raid? Did they get any cattle?"

"They raided the Oshá Creek *vega*. They didn't get any of our steers, but they fired the haystacks."

He heard her sigh deeply, but when she spoke her voice was as firm and spunky as ever. "You stay in there pitching, son. But be careful."

Walt went over and stood beside the bed. "I've got a little job of ridin' to do that may take me out of the country for a few days. Don't worry about me. I'll be careful."

She didn't answer for a moment, and Walt knew there were a lot of questions she would have liked to ask. Instead she said calmly: "Good luck."

Walt reached down a hand and ruffled her hair affectionately. She chuckled and ducked away from him. "You're about as gentle as a Newfoundland pup!" she scolded.

Walt went back in the kitchen and issued the day's powders to Rusty. "You stick around here an' keep an eye on things. After I'm gone—if he looks like he's able to ride—send Johnny to town. He can tell the sheriff he was out ridin' and found his brother, but he don't know nothin'—savvy? An' he better have Doc Barnes take a look at that shoulder of his while he's in Las Barrancas."

"An' you? You goin' flower pickin'?"

"If you need me, build a signal fire on the top of Escabroso Mountain. I don't know where I'll be but I can see that from 'most anywhere. I'll check in here to see that everything's all right every night if I can. But don't get worried an' start huntin' me if I'm gone several days. I've got a job to do that I can't do from the inside of a jail."

Rusty nodded grimly. "Likely you won't ever see the inside of a jail if Embry gets his hands on you before he's had time to cool off."

WALT gulped down a cup of the hot coffee, stuffed a flour sack with some cold biscuits and tied it onto his belt, and went outside again. The pony he had turned loose on Oshá Creek was back, standing at the gate. Walt unsaddled and turned him in the corral, then dabbed his loop on a tough little buckskin.

Rusty McGowan's head showed around the corner of the barn. "Looks like we won't have to bother sendin' Johnny after the sheriff," he said dryly.

Walt looked at him. "You mean—"

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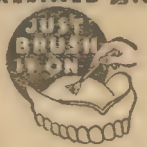

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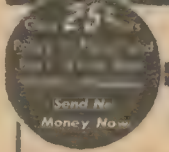

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"There's a posse headin' this way. I couldn't see very good but it looks like Dwight Mitchell, Clint Barrow and Miguel Pineda with 'em. They've stopped to water their horses at the creek, like they had something to talk over."

"Which way did they come from?"

"I couldn't tell for sure, but I think they come through the *vega.*"

Walt swore. "Mitchell sure didn't let any grass grow under his feet this time, did he?" He swung his saddle up on the buckskin. "You know how to handle 'em, Rusty?"

Rusty looked disgusted, then he grinned. "Hell—yes! It won't be no trouble at all for me to act dumb! I ain't seen you since last night. I don't know nothin' about nothin'."

"Don't overdo it," Walt cautioned him. "A coyote don't turn into a prairie dog overnight. An' we're fightin' someone who's smart."

Rusty McGowan's lean face sobered. "I know it," he said. "A hell of a lot smarter'n I ever give Dwight Mitchell credit for. I'll watch my step an' you do the same, Walt." He put out his hand, looking embarrassed at having to put any strong feeling into actual words. "If anything happens, Walt, don't you worry about your ma. I'll look after her."

Walt took the hand in a firm, hard clasp. "Thanks," he said huskily. "You'll find she ain't much of a burden."

There was another gate on the west side of the corral, with the barns and sheds between it and the house. The creek ran through one corner of the corral, making a sharp bend, then curved on, marking the boundary of yard and pasture in front of the house.

Walt led the buckskin out the gate and stepped in the saddle. Once across the creek, from the screen of alder and willow, he stopped a minute to look back. The light was getting better by the minute, and now he could see the huddle of men and horses still holding some sort of a last-minute conference by the creek, a hundred yards below the house.

From here several strips of green pine timber fingered down from the knobby hills.

IT GALLED him to seem to be running away with his tail between his legs like a whipped cur, but there was nothing else to do if he was ever to clear his name of the suspicion of murder—if he was ever to prove

his right to hold and own the land his father had left him.

He touched spurs to the buckskin and the little pony jumped into a run. He had only a dozen or so yards to go in the open before he reached the shelter of the timber, and he knew he was out of sixgun range. The buckskin was small but he was fast. Then when it seemed that the pines were almost near enough to reach out and touch, there came the sharp crack of a rifle. The terrific impact of the solid lead ball knocked Walt sideways in the saddle. Instinctively he clutched for the saddle horn.

The buckskin snorted in fright, but his next jump carried him into the timber. The rifle cracked again, and Walt heard the bullet thud into a tree trunk behind him. He felt warm blood dribbling down inside his shirt, but strangely enough, after that first burning, tearing sensation as the almost spent bullet tore through his left side, he felt no pain.

Keeping deep enough in the timber to be entirely out of sight he circled the buckskin gradually around toward a point on Oshá Creek well below the *vega* where last night's raid had taken place.

He had a good lead on them, and the buckskin was fast enough and tough enough to keep it. Once he got back in the trail where last night's raiders—and also the posse this morning—had tromped it out with a dozen set of horse tracks, he knew it would be impossible for them to track him. From there he would head for the wind-swept ledges above Escabroso Creek, where he could lay up in comparative safety while he planned some new course of action. His chance to back track last night's raiders was gone. There was no time for it now, even if the posse coming up the canyon this morning had not already thoroughly beaten out the tracks.

His last doubt about whether he had to hide out or not was gone. The paralyzed feeling in his side had begun to wear off and the swaying of his body in rhythm with his horse's lope drummed up a painful throbbing that was a constant reminder of what he could expect if he let himself fall into the hands of either Sheriff Embry or the Ventura cowboys.

He wondered if he ought just to keep on going. In some new country he could make a place for himself, then send for his mother. His ranch was not so valuable that it was worth his life.

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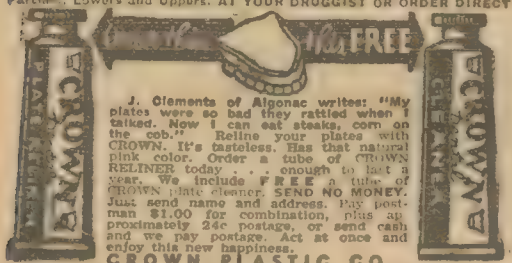

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He dismissed the thought almost as soon as it entered his mind. He knew that such an action would shame his proud and spunky mother as much as it would him. Besides, he wasn't making this fight only for himself. There were the other small ranchers to think of. That they were unwilling to help him didn't make any difference. He didn't blame them for that. They were mostly men with wives and children to think, of, and it was only natural that they should shrink from starting trouble with the powerful Ventura.

ONCE up on the Escabroso he staked his horse to graze for an hour or so in the green timber. The grass was scanty, but at least the pony was out of sight. Then he climbed up onto a rocky ledge thirty feet above the trail and stretched out in a spot out of the wind. The morning sun was warm on his middle, and in spite of the pain in his side he began to feel drowsy. He ate a cold biscuit, trying to fight off the feeling. He knew he had some fever now. For the last mile he had felt light-headed, as if about to faint.

He wadded the cotton sack he had carried the biscuits in, tight against the wound in his side, then ripped his bandanna into strips to tie the sack in place and stop some of the flow of blood.

He rolled a smoke, telling himself that he was already feeling better, that the worst of the faintness had already passed. He tried to fight down a feeling of hopelessness. But how could a hunted man hope to fight back with any success when all he had been able to do so far was only to further tighten the web of circumstantial evidence against him?

He heard a distant, rattling, rumbling sound up canyon, and his dopey mind snapped back to clarity. He crawled out farther on the ledge and looked over. He watched with increasing attention as Joe Gamel's big covered wagon hove slowly in sight.

He knew that both he and his horse were well hidden. Gamel's wagon, following an old, deeply rutted logging road, would angle down toward the next canyon, not at any time coming any closer than a quarter of a mile.

But it occurred to Walt that it was strange for Joe to be hanging around this part of the country so long. Usually he made one trip through every few months, stopping briefly to load ranch housewives up with patent medi-

cine, flavorings and piece goods, then traveling on to the Mexican settlements along the Rio Grande where he did his biggest business.

Walt wondered if the old man had expected to have two or three prime steers butchered and packed under all that other duffle in the wagon for trading with the *Mejicanos* and Indians along the Line. He had noticed before that there was usually a raid on some small rancher about the time Joe made one of his trips through. But although Joe had been long suspected of dealing in stolen goods, and once a group of angry cattlemen had held him up and searched his wagon, no one had ever been able to pin anything on the wily old trader.

Walt went down the hill and re-saddled his buckskin. Joe Gamel was an awful liar and gossipy as a woman, but circulating about as much as he did, he knew plenty if he could just be made to talk. Besides, there were medicines in that wagon—and some whiskey, as well.

Walt headed his pony up toward the narrow, rutty road and waited until Gamel's four horse wagon rumbled up.

Joe Gamel grinned at him. "Hi, Walt. I hear the sheriff's kinda got you on the run." There was a lot more malice than ordinary hurrawing in his reed-like voice.

Walt hooked a knee over the saddlehorn and rolled a smoke, with a whole lot more nonchalance than he felt. "Looks that way," he agreed amiably. "Quit lickin' your lips, Joe. I'm still on my feet an' able to shoot. You got any whiskey in the wagon?"

GAMEL spat a sluice of tobacco juice over the wheel. "Sure," he said promptly. "Whiskey, anything you want. Iodine—or maybe some of my special Red Horse liniment that I make up myself out of the finest native herbs. Guaranteed to cure anything but iggerunce."

Walt dismounted and stepped over closer to the wagon. "You ain't got some nice, fresh beef in there, have you?"

Joe Gamel's grin faded. "Now, Walt, you know I don't handle nothin like that," he chided. "I'm just a poor man tryin' to make a decent livin' an' you rich cattlemen got to go nosin' around, makin' insinuations till you make my life purely a burden."

Walt sniffed as a strong, pungent odor—an odor that somehow reminded him unpleasant-

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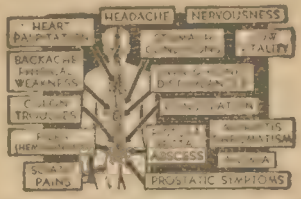

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ly of death—drifted down to him from the wagon. Mixed as it was with the other smells from the wagon—tobacco, spices and medicines—it took him a second to remember. Then he got it.

Oshá! The herb that grew only in a few moist canyons. The strong scent of it had filled the air last night. A killer had lain in ambush where it was thickest, waiting his chance to kill the already wounded man who might give his confederates away.

Walt's gun came out of its holster. He leaned his left hand hard against the wagon wheel to steady himself. "Joe," he said softly, "get down out of that wagon. I want to smell you."

Joe Gamel stared at him in puzzlement. "You jokin' me, Walt?"

"I'm not joking. I smell *oshá.*"

He saw fear flick through the shifty eyes then, and knew Joe Gamel understood. Slowly the old peddler raised his hands.

"Now, Walt," he whined in protest. "You're always tryin' to pin somethin' crooked on me. Of course you smell *oshá!* Why shouldn't you? I been diggin' the root an' peddlin' it to the Mexkins for ten years. They use it for stummick ache. You know that."

"Sure I know that," Walt agreed. "Where'd you dig it?"

Brief anger flamed in the old man's eyes. "None of your damned business!"

"You got some in the wagon now?"

Joe Gamel eyed him for a moment, obviously wondering just how far a lie would get him. "No, I ain't," he finally admitted sullenly. "I done sold it all out this mornin'."

"Okay," Walt said grimly. "Get down out of that wagon, like I told you!"

"What you aimin' to do with me, Walt?"

"Not what you're thinkin'." Walt said curtly. "I'm not the murderin' kind, but right now I wish I was. It'd save me a lot of trouble."

The old peddler climbed slowly out of the wagon. "This won't do you no good," he said, and now that he felt fairly sure Walt intended him no bodily harm, his belligerence came back. "You cain't prove nothin' on me an' I ain't got nothin' to say about nobody else!"

Walt eyed him narrowly. "Not even if I spread the word around that I've got you? You're a yellow-belly Joe, an' your gang knows it. Suppose they get to figuring they got to stop your mouth like you stopped that Embry kid's last night? What would you do?"

Joe Gamel's narrow shoulders straightened. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said defiantly. "Nobody's goin' to bother me none, no matter where I am."

"Turn around!" Walt ordered, and when the old man obeyed, he took his gun from its holster and slapped up and down his sides looking for another.

A DEADLY faintness was blurring his eyesight and drumming in his ears again, and he knew that his time was running short. If he fainted now he was as badly off as if he had fallen into either the sheriff's or Dwight Mitchell's hands. He had always known Joe Gamel was cowardly and treacherous. Now he believed him to be a murderer as well.

He backed a few steps away from the old peddler. "Get back up in the wagon, Joe, an' get me some whiskey. But keep that front flap open, so I can see you."

Gamel half turned. He eyed the cowboy narrowly, then started for the wagon, moving slowly, stalling for time.

"You better hurry!" Walt said sharply. "If I pass out, I'm goin' to pull this trigger before I go."

Gamel moved a little faster, but not much. He swung over the wagon seat and opened the flap into the huge bed of the wagon. Slowly Walt pulled himself up into the seat. He felt warm fresh blood ooze from his side from the effort. He had to hold on hard to keep from falling.

Inside the wagon Gamel had turned and was watching him. Walt tried to steady the gun in his hand. It wavered and began dropping, inch by inch. Walt shut his eyes tight, and then blinked them desperately open, trying to clear them.

Gamel, crouched like a cornered animal, watched him with his lips curled back into a snarl.

Walt's lips moved. "Get—get—" His voice broke off and he fell in a heap against the seat.

Joe Gamel was not a brave man, but this looked like a dead sure chance. He sprang forward, and his doubled fist hit Walt a glancing blow on the side of the head that knocked him sprawling out of the wagon. Gamel jumped out after him. He grabbed the cowboy's gun and raised it deliberately.

(To be continued in the next issue)

WITH TEX SHERMAN

EDITOR'S NOTE: From coast to coast the contestants and the men who produce rodeo are Tex Sherman's friends, and this wide knowledge Mr. Sherman has placed at the disposal of readers of Ranch Romances. If you have a question about rodeo, write to Tex Sherman, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y., and enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Mr. Sherman will then send you a personal reply.

THERE is something the rodeo game has needed for a long time, and that is accident insurance for contestants. A Cowboys' Protective Ass'n has been incorporated under the laws of the Province of Alberta, Canada, to provide adequate insurance for Canadian cowboys injured in the arena. We think something like this should be done for cowboys in the States too.

Frank Moore, manager of the Madison Square Garden rodeo, tells us that their prize money has been upped again this year to a total of $121,000, making this the largest amount ever paid out by a rodeo in this country. Abe Lefton will again handle the announcing in New York and Everett Colborn will furnish the stock. Also, an extra week has been added to the run.

At this writing, Dalhart, Texas, is putting on the greatest rodeo ever staged there, the XIT, one of the famous rodeos of the Southwest. This is right in the heart of the cattle country, so there should be no dearth of hands. The rodeo is staged to entertain the Dalhart Air Base personnel. Coleman, Texas, is also putting on its annual rodeo.

From Salt Lake City, Utah, comes the news—from Sheldon R. Brewster, secretary-manager—that the rodeo staged in connection with their Days of '47 celebration paid $6,000 in prizes for the five major events—$1,200 apiece for bronc-riding with saddle, bulldogging, bareback bronc-riding, calf-roping and wild-bull-riding. But the high costs of putting on a rodeo today wiped out the possibility of the Days of '47 having their big parade.

In one week in July the contestants had around $15,000 to shoot at in Utah alone, at the Salt Lake City, Ogden and Provo rodeos. And Salt Lake City is now within $2,000 of the prize money offered at the Cheyenne Frontier Days.

Down at Midland, Texas, N. A. Pittcock of Aspermont and Sonny Edwards of Midland tied in the calf-roping. Toots Mansfield, ranking money winner in this event, played to tough luck at Midland and failed to get into the money. Howard Brown of Dublin, Texas, and Gerald Roberts of Young, Ariz., tied for the bareback bronc-riding, and Larry Finley of Phoenix, Ariz., took third money. Larry also won the saddle bronc-riding, with Ken Roberts of Strong City, Kans., third. Jow Thompson of Carlsbad, N. M., made the fastest time throwing his steer—nine seconds—and Bill Iller of Fort Worth was second. In the bull-riding Ken Roberts came out first and Jimmy Schumacher second.

A couple more rodeos all set to take place are the Huron, S. Dak., Legion show and the Texas Cowboy Reunion at Stamford, Texas. Huron is paying $2,600 in cash prizes with entry fees to be added. It is a three-day show.

Weyburn, Sask., 'way up in Canada, will celebrate its 50th anniversary with a two-day rodeo which will be sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce, with J. W. Adolphie as chairman of the rodeo committee.

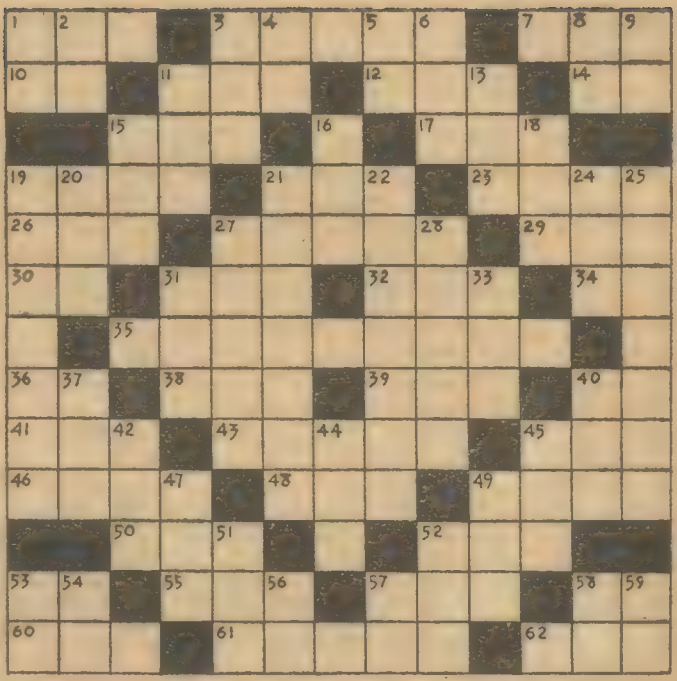
Swift River, Sask., is really coming to the front as one of Canada's great rodeos. Usually the prize money was around $1,200 but this year it will be $1,450.

In early July the Palo Pinto Livestock Ass'n had its annual rodeo in Mineral Wells, Texas. At Jonesboro, Texas, a brand new arena was christened at the West Fork rodeo. And at a rodeo held in Hawaii early in the summer tribute was paid to the late Frita Truan who died in action at Iwo Jima last February.

Adios,

Tex Sherman

THE WESTERNERS' Crossword Puzzle



The solution to this puzzle will appear in the next issue.

ACROSS

1. North-northeast (abbrev.)
3. Not here
7. South-southeast (abbrev.)
10. Combining form meaning 'dawn'
11. Enemy
12. A very large Australian bird
14. Ream (abbrev.)
15. A tattling gossip
17. Antiquity (poetic)
19. Painful
21. To cause to sit
23. Organs of sight
26. Reverential fear
27. A diversion
29. Epoch
30. Government Issue (abbrev.)
31. A high rocky crag
32. Three-toed sloths
34. Editor (abbrev.)
35. A Mexican plant used as an insecticide
36. Preposition
38. The ruler of Tunis
39. Guided
40. A suffix denoting an alcohol
41. River (Spanish)
43. To put at rest again
45. Raw metal
46. A medley
48. To free
49. Fragrance
50. The sign of the zodiac after Cancer
52. Open (poetic)
53. Arabia (abbrev.)
55. Railway Post Office (abbrev.)
57. Worthless leaving
58. Preposition
60. North-northwest (abbrev.)
61. Sour and astringent
62. South-southwest (abbrev.)

Solution to Second Sept. Puzzle

DOWN

1. Northeast (abbrev.)
2. The negative
3. Pedal digit
4. Pronoun
5. Second note of the musical scale
6. An uncle
8. Senior (abbrev.)
9. A printer's measure
11. An exclamation of impatience
13. Suffix meaning 'small'
15. Prefix meaning 'before'
18. To color
19. The state flower of Arizona
20. Office of War Information (abbrev.)
21. An atomizer
22. Tracked
24. Before (poetic)
25. A maker of saddles
27. Staid
28. Covered with pieces of fired clay
31. A slight flap
33. Sealed (abbrev.)
37. Until (poetic)
40. Combining form meaning 'mountain'
42. To lubricate
44. To offer as a price
45. A short, joyous poem
47. Over (contr.)
49. Optics (abbrev.)
51. Office of Price Administration (abbrev.)
52. A circle
53. Article
54. Registered Nurse (abbrev.)
56. Ocean (abbrev.)
57. Either
58. A bone
59. Northwest

TRAIL'S END ROLL CALL

From all points of the compass, members flock to the fold of the Trail's End Club. Welcome, newcomers!

Miss Ruby Anderson, Box 6, Waterville, Wash.
Mrs. Velma L. Benner, Box 2, Waterville, Wash.
Miss Katie Bratton, Box 185, Sutherlin, Ore.
Miss Margaret Brown, Rt. 1, Box 229, Newberg, Ore.
Mrs. Emma Castleman, Box 181, San Francisco, Calif.
Mrs. Ruth Denes, Adena, Colo.
Mr. H. W. Dilbeck, 2604 E. 21st St., Chattanooga, Tenn.
Mr. Pete R. Fabionar, Box 1549, Clinton St., Fresno, Calif.
Miss Victoria Gomez, Genoa, Texas
Mr. Melvin Henry Guetter, 223 3rd Ave., San Francisco, Calif.
Miss Cindy H. Kishbaugh, 531 E. 4th St., Mescopeck, Penna.
Miss Edith B. Lance, Rt. 3, Asheville, N. C.
Miss Iris Lang, Box 123, Panderay, Ida.
Miss Betty Lee, R.F.D. 1, Sagle, Ida.
Miss Shirley Lee, R.F.D. 1, Sagle, Ida.
Mrs. Elva May McClelland, 1729 Wilson Ave., New Castle, Penn.
Miss Norma F. Mohn, 5-10 Ave. West R. R. St., Kalispell, Mont.
Miss Constance Pace, Gen. Del., Beckley, W. Va.
Mr. Tony T. Rich, 120 Naperville Rd., Westmont, Ill.
Miss Barbara J. Rose, 108 W. Johnson Ave., West Terre Haute, Ind.
Miss Bernice Rybouzyh, 2729 S. Whipple St., Chicago 23, Ill.
Miss Jean Sanborn, Weld, Me.
Miss Flossie L. Scott, 2303 Crystal St., Anderson, Ind.
Miss Helen Ray Sellers, Box 24, Comanche, Okla.
Mrs. Letha Mae Sharpe, Rt. 1, Perry, Ark.
Miss Margaret Cecilia Silva, R. R. 2, Box 120, Delta, Colo.
Mrs. Sara Sowder, Rt. 1, Box 89, Speedwell, Tenn.
Mrs. Esther Spalding, Box 870, Missoula, Mont.
Mrs. Emma Spousler, Box 144, Gresham, Ore.
Mr. Mack Spruell, Brookside, Ala.
Miss Lula Mae Stephens, St. Andrews, Fla.
Miss Ella Stockamp, R. R. 3, Litchfield, Ill.
Miss Virginia Stovall, Rt. 3, Jackson, Tenn.
Miss Gladys Strickert, Box 274, Grand Coulee, Wash.
Mrs. Estelle M. Sullivan, Box 426, Rockville, Md.
Mr. Ernest L. Tadlock, Gen. Del., Lubbock, Texas
Miss Ethel Taft, Bicknell, Utah
Miss Alice Thomas, Paul, Ala.
Miss Hazel Thompson, Rt. 2, Greenback, Tenn.
Mrs. Thelma Vancour, 185 Pine St., Burlington, Vt.
Miss Madonna Mae Waitman, 2135 Poplar St., Anderson, Ind.
Miss Violet Wallin, Rt. 1, Grey Eagle, Minn.
Miss Phyllis Wilt, Teltonsville, Ohio
Mrs. Iva Winters, Box 111, Project City, Calif.
Miss Mary Woodcock, Rt. 1, Sandgate, Vt.
Mr. Earnest L. Yardley, Rt. 4, Milan, Mo.
Miss Dorothy M. Young, 26 Taylor St., Washington, N. J.
Mr. James Zachary, Rotan, Texas
Mr. David H. Zumwalt, 930 Hamilton, St. Louis, Mo.
Mr. Jack V. Zunke, Box 472, St. Maries, Idaho

Until the war is over it will not be possible for us to offer Trail's End pins and buttons, for metal is now needed for war uses. However, it is still possible to become a member of the friendly Trail's End Club. All you have to do is fill out the coupon here below and send it in to the Trail's End Club, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Your name will then be added to our membership rolls and published on the Trail's End page of the magazine.

TRAIL'S END MEMBERSHIP COUPON

I wish to enroll as a member of the Trail's End Club of RANCH ROMANCES.

(Please print your name and address and check whether you are Miss, Mrs., or Mr.)

Miss
Mrs.
Mr. .....

Address .....

City ..... **State**..... 9-21-45

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 20 years Our Air Mail has been running between reader and reader of Ranch Romances, making for them new friends in near and far-off places. Any reader may write directly to anyone whose letter is printed in this department, provided he upholds the clean, wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended solely for those who really want correspondents. We ask you to refrain from using it as a medium for practical jokes and particularly not to sign your letters with other people's names. In accordance with the wishes of the War and Navy Departments, we print no letters to or from service men. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y.

She Wants Some Mail, Too

Dear Editor:

May I join your friendly group, because I, too, would like to receive some mail. I am a widow and I'm 40 years old. I have black curly hair and hazel eyes. I have a son in the U. S. Marine Corps. I get lonely at times, so I read to while away the time. I like people and a large variety of sports, the movies, and going places. Won't somebody fill my mailbox, pease?

MRS. RUTH KOVAL

912 Parsley Ave.,
Pascagoula, Miss.

Won't You Write?

Dear Editor:

Will you please print my plea? I've sent my name in care of this column before, but I've never seen it in print. I am 20 years old, have blue eyes and blond hair. I love to make new friends and my job enables me to do so. I enjoy all types of music and love the outdoors. Won't you write to me?

BARBARA R. MOROVCHEK

Rt. 1,
Jonestown, Pa.

Hopefully Waiting

Dear Editor:

Won't you please, please slip this letter in some little corner somewhere? I'd like to hear from friends all over this country, as I'm terribly lonely, living so far away from my home. I'm a blue-eyed brunette, and just as Irish as I can be. Dancing is my favorite pastime, and collecting jokes my hobby. Since I've found life interesting all through my 23 years, I'm sure I could make my letters that way, too. So come on, pals, young and old, grab a pencil and some paper, and shoot me some mail, will you?

LILA DEARINGER

Box 757
Walla Walla, Wash.

Odelle's Right Chubby

Dear Editor:

I am a reader of Ranch Romances, and I hope you will find me some pen pals. I am 16 years old, have brown hair and eyes to match. I'm five feet, five inches tall, and am a right chubby girl. My hobbies are writing, horseback riding, and collecting snapshots. So come on, boys and girls around 15 to 20 years old, let's be pen pals.

ODELLE AMOS

Ontario, Va.

She's Full of Fun

Dear Editor:

I have written several times, but so far no luck. Please print my plea for pen pals this time? I read every story in each new Ranch Romances, and could not get along without its keen stories. I'm a girl of 17 with dark blue eyes and brown hair. I'd like to hear from people between 18 and 24, preferably. I love to dance, am full of fun, and love movies. I'll answer, so hurry and grab that pencil and paper.

JUNE STAFFORD

Rt. 1, Box 141
Crows Landing, Calif.

A Shut-In Would Like to Make Friends

Dear Editor:

I'd like to make friends through Our Air Mail, and hope you will print this in your column. I've been a shut-in for four years, and haven't too many friends. My hobbies are collecting stamps and Indian relics, and I'll exchange some with anyone who is interested. I hope to hear from people of all ages, from everywhere, and will answer all letters.

CHARLES BOGGS

R. R. 1,
Connersville, Ind.

Are YOU a Wrong One?

Dear Editor:

Many times I have written people whose letters appeared in Our Air Mail, but I've never once gotten an answer. Maybe I've written the wrong ones. The next bit of information is for the

"right people" everywhere, who will, I'm sure, write to me. I'm practically eighteen. I'm quite tall, have brown hair and brown eyes. I was born in the best state in the union—Missouri. I like skating, tennis, swimming, writing, music and more music. I adore Ingrid Bergmann and Gary Cooper. Also, I want to join the Cadet Nurse Corps. Is anybody interested? Yes!

MARY SULENTIC

Box 21
Belleville, Ill.

Here's Your Small Corner, June

Dear Editor:

Will you please find a small corner for me? I like most any kind of sports, and I love to read. I'm a young girl in high school. I'd like to hear from everyone of all ages; including some real honest-to-goodness cowboys and cowgirls. Here's hoping the mailbox is running over with letters for me, soon.

JUNE GIBBS

Rt. 2
Avoca, Texas

A Lonely South African

Dear Editor:

I've been reading Ranch Romances for several years now and enjoy the stories very much. I am 16 years old. My favorite hobby is farming and horseback riding. I would like to hear from boys and girls in America and Australia, from 16 years upwards to 20 years. Come on and write soon, boys and girls.

CECILIA FORST

24 Rennette Mansion, Plein St.
Johannesburg, T.V.L.
S. Africa

Johnnie Just Likes to Have Mail

Dear Editor:

Hello there. I want some pen pals. I'm not lonely; just like to receive letters. I'm a girl of 17, love to sing, picnic, hike and go to the movies. I'm five feet seven inches tall, have blond hair and blue eyes. I'll answer all letters, so come on and drop me a line.

JOHNNIE NELSON

102 MacArthur
Tucson, Ariz.

Who Likes Mince Pie and Sweet Milk?

Dear Editor:

I'd be very much pleased if you could get me some pen pals. I'm a 14-year-old girl with brown hair and grey-green eyes. I like to play basketball, and I'm a student of the Rockmart Public High School. I'm friendly, not conceited, and easy to get along with. I love all kinds of sports, especially basketball, football, baseball, and bowling. I'm nuts about jive music, mince meat pie and sweet milk. I've no favorite movie star, but I really go for the Andrews Sisters and the Georgia Tech football players. So come on, kids, write a hep-cat from Georgia.

LOISE HOLLADAY

Rt. 3,
Rockmart, Ga.

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

By Professor Marcus Mari

The Girl of Libra

September 24-October 23

Professor Mari will be glad to give a personal reading to anyone who sends this coupon to him in care of Ranch Romances, 515 Madison Ave., New York 22, N. Y. ENCLOSE STAMPED AND SELF-ADDRESSED ENVELOPE.

Name ..... Sex.....
Address .....
.....
Exact date of birth: Year..... Month.....
Day of Month..... 9-21-45

LIKE HER brother under the zodiacal sun, the Libra Girl is a warm-hearted, honest person whose main concern, whether she is aware of it or not, is fair-play. She passionately hates cruelty and injustice, is contemptuous of all social snobbery. She, like the scale that portrays her sign, has a nicely balanced personality, an even disposition, a stern and uncompromising set of values. She is not the sort of girl who has one set of rules for her own conduct and another for other people.

The man she marries should be, above all else, honest and straight-forward with her. She hates deceit and will seldom tolerate it long. Because she is quick and intelligent, she can sense a fraud or a lie long before others are aware of it. She treats her children with faultless fairness and makes an excellent mother. She is outspoken; often, indeed, too frank for her own good. She is not the type to nurse a grudge behind a false smile. She enjoys travel and adventure and can make a superb wife for a restless man. Too, she is equally content to remain in one place and make a home and raise her children. Hers is not a greedy nature. She does not demand gaudy and impossible things of life.

While graceful and talented, the home is her real forte usually. She can, and often does, engage in outside activities, but her deepest interests are her family and her loved ones. She is faithful, considerate and lovable. Both men and women enjoy her company. She does not give her friendship or her secrets easily, but once taken into her heart, you have a friend for life.

There are two things the Libra girl might keep in mind: She has a stern little way of seldom forgiving an enemy, and she should learn to relax and rest. Life to her can sometimes become a little too "real and earnest."

"THIS WISDOM MUST DIE!"

Truths That Have Been Denied Struggling Humanity

FOR every word that has left the lips of bishops or statesmen to enlighten man, a thousand have been withheld. For every book publicly exposed to the inquiring mind, one hundred more have been suppressed—*damned to oblivion*. Each year of progress has been wilfully delayed centuries. Wisdom has had to filter through biased, secret sessions or ecclesiastical council meetings, where high dignitaries of state and church alone proclaimed what man should know.

Are you prepared to demand the hidden facts of life? Will you continue to believe that you are not capable of weighing the worth of knowledge that concerns your personal freedom and happiness? Realize that much that can make your life more *understandable* and *livable* has been left unexplained or intentionally destroyed. At first by word of mouth only, and *now* by private discourses, are *revealed* those truths which secret brotherhoods preserved in ancient temples and hidden sanctuaries, from those who sought to selfishly deprive humanity of them.

THIS *free* BOOK OF EXPLANATION

Let the Rosicrucians, one of these ancient brotherhoods of learning, tell you about these amazing truths, and explain how you, too, like thousands of others, may now use them to enjoy the fullness of life. The Rosicrucians, (not a religious organization) invite you to use the coupon opposite and receive the FREE copy of the fascinating, Sealed Book, with its startling tale of *self help*.

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SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.

Scribe L. P. X.
THE ROSICRUCIANS (AMORC)
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California, U.S.A.

Please send me your FREE Sealed Book. I am sincerely interested in learning how I may receive these long-concealed facts of life.

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Address.....

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Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear—if we can provide you with the support you want and need? Learn NOW about this perfected truss-invention for most forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire . . . you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy most of life's activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture lessened in your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of Rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained* . . . have worn our support without the slightest inconvenience. Perhaps we can do as much for you. Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where other trusses have failed is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, do not *despair*. The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

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Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that helps Nature support the weakened muscles gently but securely, day and night. Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for relief from pain and worry,—results beyond the expectations of the writers. What is this invention—how does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Air-Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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"A few weeks ago I received the Appliance you made for me. Wouldn't do without it now. My fellow workers notice how much better I can do my work and get around over these ships—and believe me, the work in a Navy shipyard is anything but easy. I never lose a day's work now."—J. A. Comer, 1505 Green Ave., Orange, Texas.

Perfect Relief—Full Satisfaction

"Your truss gives FULL SATISFACTION. I feel it my moral duty to testify to the world:—(A)—That I have been ruptured 45 years. (B)—was operated on scientifically ten years ago when 76 years of age; but the rupture returned soon. Have tried everything; but only now do I find PERFECT RELIEF in your appliance."—Lee R. Stroud, 601 E. Grove St., Kaufman, Texas.

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State whether for Man ☐ Woman ☐ or Child ☐

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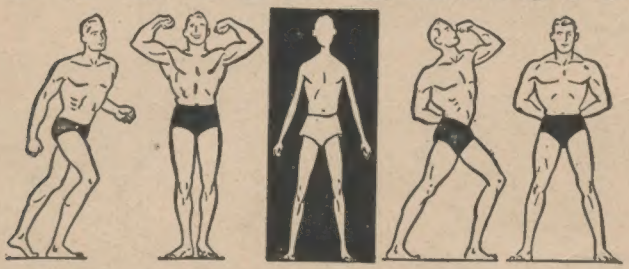

Let Me PROVE I Can Make You a NEW MAN in Only 15 Minutes a Day!

HOW do YOU look *stripped*—in locker-room or gym? Skinny, scrawny, sparrow-chested, self-conscious, HALF ALIVE?

How do you feel when people notice *your* physique? Can you stand their gaze? If you're not satisfied with your present physical development, let me prove I can make you a New Man—in only 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home! I'll give you biceps like iron and a fine, deep chest. I'll broaden your shoulders, add ridges of solid muscle to your stomach, fill out your arms and legs. If you are fat and flabby, I'll streamline you into a picture of radiant manhood.

What "*Dynamic Tension*" Can Do

How? *"Dynamic Tension!"* That's the secret that changed me from a flat-chested 97-lb. weakling into the red-blooded HE-MAN that I am today. That's how I'm turning thousands of fellows like yourself into New Men—with husky, handsome body and tireless endurance. I can do the same for you. Let me PROVE it!

"Dynamic Tension" is a PRACTICAL and NATURAL method. You use no tiring apparatus, no muscle-straining gadgets. My method is actually FUN! In only 15 minutes a day, you will actually see your muscles increase into powerful bulges of brawn and strength. You'll enjoy new stamina, a glad-to-be-alive feeling. Before you know it, you'll have a rugged, handsome body, a rough-and-ready ambition surging out of you that the world can't lick! I'll show you how it really feels to LIVE!

CHARLES ATLAS

An untouched photo of Charles Atlas, twice winner and holder of the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

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All I ask is that you mail the coupon NOW for my illustrated FREE book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It shows actual photos of pupils I've changed from weaklings into remarkable specimens of manhood. If you want a body that men respect and women admire, then get this coupon into the mails as fast as you can. Address me personally, CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 99, 15 E. 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.

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I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

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